



"A moment later he saw his own figure burst
the room" (Page 17)
[Modern Miracle] [Frontispiece]

A

MODERN MIRACLE

BY

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A MODERN MIRACLE

CHAPTER I

THE GARDEN AND THE SERPENT

“LEAP! Una, leap!”

The boy stood solid, planted on the green sward of the pleasure-ground with blue eyes and strong hands raised. Two slim trout-rods with spikes stuck in the ground towered beside him. A dozen feet above his head the latticed window opened like a door, and on the window-sill a young girl stood balancing lightly as a bird. Her brown curls were blown about by the fresh breeze, her brown eyes were very bright with excitement and fear—the fear that is more than half delight—as she trembled and stooped as if to lessen the distance from the ground.

They were very unlike those two. The boy was about seventeen years of age and looked more: the girl fifteen and looked less. He was fair with crisp curls and an honest comely face: she was dark with ringlets

of brown silk floss and a cheek like a dusky damask rose, and the figure of a fairy.

"Leap! Una!" he shouted again, "there is no fear of you."

With a little half-frightened cry she sprang out like a bird from its perch into the stretched arms below.

He caught her as she came, bent a little to the shock, and landed her feet on the ground light as the thistle-down.

"You're a darling, Miles!" she cried, panting with the peril and excitement, and she kissed him impulsively.

He took the leap and the kiss as a matter of course. Without a word he plucked the fishing-rods from the ground, and the two went off gaily together, he walking with long steady stride, she skipping like a young fawn beside him, towards the tumultuous trout stream that, wild with the spring floods, swirled and surged round the far slope of the wide lawn.

The girl's shadow as she leaped crossed the window of a small boudoir beneath in which a lady sat.

Startled she sprang from her chair to the window just in time to see the happy pair with fishing-rods pointing from their shoulders go gaily off together across the lawn.

Her face, that was full of trouble, brightened for a moment at the sight.

"God grant it," she muttered under her breath.

No one that saw the brightening of the pale face, or the

love that lighted in her eyes as they watched the boy and girl till they vanished into the woods, could doubt the meaning of that prayer. But the trouble came back to her face as she dropped listlessly into the easy-chair, and read again with aimless persistency a letter whose lines showed dim and blurred through the mist of unshed tears.

Her pale cheek seemed paler from the deep tint of the violet velvet cushioned chair against which it leaned—her sadness was sadder from the bright beauty of the room in which she sat.

“DEAREST SOPHIE”—the letter began—“I must call you dearest from the memory of the old times, though I have no right of course. Do you ever think of me? Is this letter a pleasant surprise, or otherwise? Don’t you be frightened, I don’t intend to try love-making. I had my chance and missed it. I know I treated you shamefully. I was as fond of you as I could be of any girl. But love in a cottage was not in my line, so when it came to a choice between the governess and the heiress, of course the heiress carried the day and the man. You need bear no malice; you did much better for yourself afterwards; your husband is a decent chap by all accounts, and, what’s better still, the richest commoner in England there or thereabouts.

“My poor Louisa was not a bad sort either, and I made her a good husband while the money lasted, and gave her

a share of the fun of spending it. Perhaps it was as well for both of us that she went out herself so soon after the money.

"It was good of you to take over my little girl, Sophie, when I went to the wall, for auld lang syne's sake, and better still of your husband. But—there is always a 'but' in these matters—I've had a peep at my Una. She is growing into a beauty, and I want her, Sophie, I want her for myself. There, the murder is out now. I feel I am playing it low down on her and you and the husband. She's better off with you; I know, but I cannot help that—I'm hungry and thirsty for my little girl. I've got some money together at last, made on the race-course, if you must know, and feel I can give her a home of a sort, and she'll help me to turn over a new leaf. Just a lucky plunge or two more and we'll settle down comfortably.

"Don't think me more of a brute than you can help, Sophie, but I must have my girl back. I wrote to you first. You can patch it up with your husband. There is no great hurry. If you could meet me to-night in the summer-house—you know at the brink of the river—we could arrange what's best to be done. You may show this letter or not as you please to your husband. I think not until we have seen each other, any way.

"Yours as ever,

"DICK SPENCER."

The letter dropped from her fingers to the table, and rustled unheeded to the carpet. Her memory went back to the days long ago when she—a quiet, shy, demure girl of eighteen—was in love, or fancied herself in love, with the dashing cavalry captain—*debonnaire* Dick Spencer—who professed a perfect idolatry for her. But he left her lightly for the heiress whose money he spent with both hands.

When later on Wilfred Bronder offered her a strong man's love and won a true woman's love in return, she told him the whole story, and they smiled together—not laughed—at the girlish romance. But the memory of a first love—however slight and transient—never dies. The happy contented wife and mother, whose husband's wealth was spent with the lavishness of love to minister to her slightest whim, still kept a kindly place in her heart for the handsome scapegrace that had deserted her.

He went down-hill at a gallop, and when his wife died and his fortune vanished, his old sweetheart, with her husband's full approval, wrote offering him a home to his little girl Una—his only child.

So Una had come to Oakdale—a curly-headed, bright-eyed little toddler of three, wonderfully like her handsome father—and had lived with them since then and wound herself round both their hearts, and never, till the morning's post had brought that unwelcome letter which now lay on the carpet at Mrs.

Bronder's feet, had there been a question of parting.

A tap at the door startled her and sent old memories flying and brought the present trouble back. She knew the sound, and the thought flashed through her mind, "I'll tell him everything." She little guessed how her whole life trembled for that instant in the balance. But the next the answering thought came, "Why trouble him while there's hope?" and without a pause—so swift the thought and answer—she picked the letter from the carpet and crumpled it into her pocket, and cried, "Come in!"

Wilfred Bronder was as like his son as man can be to a boy. Square-built, steady-eyed, honest, comely and kindly. The woman is fortunate who has such a man for a husband.

So thought his wife, and the cloud lightened on her face as he slipped a strong arm round her waist and drew her down beside him on the soft-cushioned sofa. For they two—in company the staidest of the staid—still loved to play at honeymooning when they were quite alone.

"You look pale, Sophie," he said anxiously, for the couch faced the light, "pale and tired. You mope and work and read too much, making the path to knowledge smooth for Una. You want sunshine and pure air as the flowers do. The youngsters know that by instinct. They are off for a long day. I met them with rods and fishing-basket, skirting the lawn."

"I saw them go," she said, with an answering smile. "I saw Una leap from her window into his arms. They are very fond of each other, Wilfred."

Her eyes sought his with a questioning look, and he answered her question in words. "There is nothing in the world I would like better, Sophie."

She crumpled the letter with angry fingers in her pocket. Again the persistent thought came—"Now tell him all," and again the answer, "Wait."

"I have come to take possession of you," he went on gaily. "The spring wind and sunshine will put colour in your cheeks. A row, or a drive, or a walk—which-ever you please—but one of the three it must be. It is a glorious day. The thrushes in the shrubbery have gone mad with delight."

With his arm still round her waist he drew her to a bow-window at the further end of the room, that looked and opened on a large old-fashioned garden where fruit and flowers grew sociably together. His arm dropped almost shyly to his side, for two men were coming towards him up the broad gravel walk bordered with budding rose-trees, so close he could hear the faint sound of their voices in earnest talk.

They were an oddly-assorted pair—the one middle-sized, middle-aged, close-shaven, square-chinned, clean-featured, spick and span; the other tall, broad-shouldered, but gaunt as a greyhound, carelessly dressed rather than shabbily, with loose clothes that hung like

drapery on the angles of his body ; a long shaggy beard and a long shaggy moustache, which he fingered restlessly, covered a good half of his face.

Both men started as they saw the two others standing suddenly at the window with only the plate glass and half-a-dozen paces of garden-walk between. The dapper man instantly smiled and raised his straw hat in courteous salute. The gaunt man nodded curtly, almost sulkily. Then the two wheeled round abruptly and strolled off down the long walk to the other end of the garden—a good half-mile away.

" Your learned bear grows more bearish every day," said Sophie.

" And more learned," he answered, laughingly. " He's a wonderful man—the most wonderful of his age. His laboratory is like a magician's cave. He can make electricity do anything he wants it ; and he is, I do believe, the greatest chemist in the world. It is a pleasure to be taught by such a man—it is an honour. But what Thorncroft and he can have in common puzzles me. The courteous, respectable, successful London solicitor ; and the gaunt, gruff, dishevelled, gifted, but unsuccessful scientist—what in the name of wonder can they have to say to one another ? "

If Wilfred Bronder heard what those two had to say to each other at that moment it would have increased his bewilderment. They were seated at the further end of the garden on a rustic seat that circled the huge

trunk of a gnarled apple-tree. A great pile of blossom, a thick mantle of soft, sweet-scented, pinky-white petals covered its wide interlacing branches—a summer cave, warm and bright without and dark and cool within; and all alive with the hum of bees and the twitter of song-birds. The beauty, the perfume, and the music of the spring were pleasant to the senses, were good for the soul. But the self-absorbed men cared for none of those things.

The scientist was gruff; the solicitor conciliatory and persuasive, yet with the hint of a certain masterfulness in his tone.

"A full quarter shall be yours when we succeed," he said; "besides——"

"Never mind the 'besides,'" interrupted the other impatiently, as a horse touched by the keen steel of the spur, "I know all about that. You can never get a man's best work out of him by fear. My good-will is worth buying."

"Exactly," Thorncroft assented, "and I am willing to give a big price for it. You have your own object in view, and I mine. I am willing to help you for my own sake; you should surely be willing to help me for yours. That is, if you still believe the thing possible."

He glanced covertly with shrewd grey eyes at the excited face of his companion. In the dull sunken blue eyes there kindled the fire of a mad enthusiasm.

"Believe!" he whispered vehemently, "I know it. It is easy, it is simple; with the means in my hands I cannot fail. A score of times I have been on the brink of success. I can bring life to an end in a second; why not indefinitely prolong it? It drives me mad to think that the mere want of money, that hundreds of fools lavish aimlessly, should stand between me and the great secret. I spoke to your Bronder of it when he patronized me and brought me here. The dolt laughed in my face. He refused the money that I asked; it would have meant nothing to him—not a fourth part of his fortune—and I asked it on my knees."

"'Have a care, Curson,'" he said, "'don't let your mind run on such nonsense. That way madness lies. Stick to your work and don't try miracles; the thing is impossible.' Curse him, the self-sufficient simpleton, to whom nature's secrets are all miracles until they become commonplace. But you believe me, Thorne-croft?"—turning abruptly and almost fiercely on his companion.

Thorne-croft shrugged his shoulders. "I'm willing to help you," he began; "what can it matter to you whether I believe or not?" But another side-glance at the eager face and he changed his tone. "Well, if you must have the truth," he continued, "you have convinced me that you are on the right track of the great secret men have sought for so long in vain, and I help you in the hope of sharing it."

"And you shall! you shall!" said Curson earnestly, "I swear you shall."

"Meanwhile," interposed Thorncroft gently, "there is this little piece of work to be done first."

Curson's face clouded again.

"I don't see how that can help us to the money," he said sulkily.

"Not at once, of course. But it is one obstacle, I believe two, out of our way. It is two steps towards what we desire, and we must get there step by step or not at all. I see my way plainly to this end. But you must help. I've done my part. I found the man out. I lent him money. I praised his daughter and hinted she would be happier with him. He told me he would write the letter, and he did. I saw her start and turn pale as she opened it at breakfast this morning."

"Are you sure she'll go?"

"Almost. You never can be quite sure of anything except in science. Of men and women—women especially—you can only make a good guess. She'll go alone unless she tells him of the letter, and for one reason or another I think she won't tell him."

"But this thing is not in my line. It seems almost brutal. I could give you a tiny pinch of tasteless colourless, white powder which——"

"It's no use, no use at all," Thorncroft interrupted hastily, "the time may come for that later on, but it

is not now. The boy has got to be considered. We must put father and son apart if possible, and this is the only way you can hope to do it."

"But why not you yourself, since you have begun the work, why not end it?"

"Why not? because it's not in my line either, far less in my line than in yours, Curson. You are strong, and I am weak. You have courage, and I—I'm not the least ashamed of the fact—have none. Besides, I don't know whether this will flatter or insult. You don't believe in anything good or evil; you don't believe there is a distinction except so far as everything you desire is good, and everything you dislike evil. It is only the doing that troubles you. You won't have the least fear beforehand or remorse afterwards."

Curson was plainly flattered by this picture of the fearless, remorseless fanatic.

"You are sure there is no danger?" the fearless fatalist asked with a certain anxiety in his voice.

"Not the slightest," replied Thorncroft, shutting his lips tight on a grim smile. "They will be wholly unprepared; it will appear an accident—or, better still, a suicide."

"At ten o'clock, you say?"

"Ten is the hour, but you had better go half-an-hour before."

"I shan't fail." He rose as he spoke and moved

away, a grim hulking shadow in the sunshine, towards his laboratory in a far wing of the great house.

Mr. Thorncroft rose too, lightly brushed away some petals of the apple-blossom that had fallen upon him, and hummed an air from the latest comic opera—he was fond of light music—as he paced sedately back down the long walk between the rose-bushes.

Suddenly his whole face changed and brightened; for stepping briskly down the garden-walk to meet him came his only son. He knew him at the further end of the long walk. It was indeed a face and figure not easy to mistake—a face and figure to gladden the heart of a father. Cyril Thorncroft was in the very prime of splendid manhood—a man for an impressionable woman to go mad and rave about. The very pink of physical male perfection. His figure was tall, slim, graceful; his face perfect in curve and colour. Brilliant dark eyes, wavy black hair, silky black moustache, red lips, white teeth—everything the sentimental maiden could desire. Even the frock-coat and tall hat of prosaic civilization couldn't spoil him.

There was indeed something of a woman's admiration and love in the eyes of the staid and unemotional solicitor as father and son met and grasped hands warmly.

"Welcome, Cyril!" the father cried, "I'm glad you came!"

"Obedience, sir," answered Adonis languidly ; "I got your wire."

"Oh ! I don't want to make a victim of you, my boy ; surely you can enjoy yourself for a few days at Oakdale ; it's a beautiful place."

"Dull."

"There's splendid fishing."

"Damp, sir, damp. Then your special friend—what's his name ?—the chemist chap, is mad. My uncle is a fogey, my aunt is a ' saint,' and my cousin is a cub."

"You have forgotten one of the family," said the father, with a note of interest in his voice and keen eyes fixed on his son's handsome face, "the pretty, bright, little Una."

"A baby," said the other.

"She promises to be a beauty."

"My dear father, I prefer feminine performance to promises, which are so often broken. I like the rose full-blown, I don't care for your rosebud."

He swished a rosebud from the bush with his walking cane as he spoke, and crushed it under his foot as it lay on the gravel path.

CHAPTER II

PREMEDITATED AND CONTRIVED MURDER

TWICE Sophie Bronder had gone close to listen to the faint tick of the pretty ormolu Cupid and Psyche clock on the mantelpiece in her boudoir. So slow the hands seemed to move she was sure it had stopped. She was impatient to have her hard task over. She little guessed what its ending was to be.

Slowly, slowly the hands crawled on to half-past nine. It was time for her to start. She flung a dark-grey cloak over her shoulders and slipped out through a French window that opened on the lawn. From the window of the dining-room where her husband and the others still sat at table, a broad band of brightness from the electric light lay across the blackness of the shadowed lawn merging in the moonlight. Close by the window her path lay, and as she went by, swift and silently as a ghost, she could hear the murmur of their talk. Mr. Thorncroft's clear precise tone rose distinct above the rest. He was telling one of his quaintly humorous stories. There was a pause as she went

by the window—only an instant, but it shot a sudden fear through her that she was seen. Then the voice went on again smoothly as before, and a shout of laughter greeted the finishing of the story.

Past the house she went and across a corner of the lawn to a shaded pathway that led windingly to the old summer-house by the river.

The night was fine. A warm wind blew fresh on her face, stirred and rustled in the woods. A full moon shone clear for the most part. But now and again a dark scudding cloud charged upon it across the black field of the sky to be whitened as it touched the white light and dispersed in radiance.

The smell of the violets and hyacinths was sweet on the warm night air as she entered the shaded path where the moonlight piercing the thick shades lay in fantastic white embroidery on the black ground.

Through the rustle of the leaves, growing momentarily louder till it deepened to a roar, she heard the voice of the swollen river. Then dominating the faint perfume of the flowers, the pungent odour of a cigar came to her on the wind. Beyond the opening of the pathway she saw the old summer-house stand like a big black blotch against the moonlight on the river's brink. Beside it was a smaller darkness and a red spark like a fire-fly where Dick Spencer smoked and waited.

"It is good of you to come, Sophie," he said, when

she gave him her hand frankly and sedately as an elder sister might.

As he spoke he tossed his half-smoked cigar from the high bank into the deep swift current, where its light hissed and died. "You are not angry with me, I hope?"

"Not angry, Dick," she answered softly, "but disappointed for your own sake and for the child's—more for your sake, I think, even than for the child's."

"I mean my child no harm," he said in sulky self-defence, "I mean to make her as happy as I can."

"Meaning and doing are different, Dick. No one knows that, or ought to know that better than you. Una is very happy with us and very good. Is it a happy home or a wholesome home for a pure and innocent little girl that you would lead her to?"

"Oh! I'll settle down all right after—"

"After a little more drinking and gambling and dissolute living. Do you believe yourself when you say it? Do you want me to believe it who know how often the promise has been made and broken?"

"Don't be too hard on a chap, Sophie," he pleaded, "it's not your way to be hard. You can't tell how lonely my life is—aye, and how miserable in spite of the fun and excitement. I want some one to care about and look after, besides my worthless self. I will keep the little girl's life apart from mine."

"Leave it apart from yours, Dick, so long as your

life is what it is. Don't let self-pity blind you. It is not good for the girl to go. She is happy with us, as I have said, and we hope to keep her happy to the end. Why should I not tell you all we hope? my husband as well as I believe our boy will make her a happy wife. They are fond of each other—very fond, and he is his father's son; he will be a man with whom a wife's happiness will be secure. Will you ruin this hope to gratify a selfish whim?"

"I'm d——d if I do!" he cried suddenly, "but it's hard on a chap all the same to be cut off for ever from his own. Oh! Sophie, you have no notion what a lonely, miserable dog I am—what a lonely, miserable life I lead."

"Then why lead it, Dick?" she asked soothingly. The shy innocent young love she had once had for this man was warm in her heart yet, changed to motherly tenderness and pity as if he was a wild wayward boy and she an elder sister. She felt herself ever so much older and wiser. "Why lead it?" she persisted, "you are capable of better things. Be worthy of yourself!"

"It is too late, Sophie," he answered with affected carelessness, but there was a queer catch in his voice that betrayed him. "I have gone three-quarters way to the devil and must finish the journey."

"It is never too late," she urged—that great simple formula of love and faith and hope.

"It is my fate," he went on, not heeding her words,

slowly, doubtfully, sadly—as if arguing with himself. “I have tried, Sophie, more than once. I know my own strength and weakness. You cannot turn back any more than that river that goes on and down till it loses itself in the sea.”

They had come out of the shadow of the summer-house and were standing on the steep bank of the river.

Down below they could hear the angry clamour of its strong swollen current loud in the cool stillness of the night, and could catch by times the glint of the moon-light as it touched the waves.

“You cannot stop or turn the stream,” he repeated more doggedly, “and a man cannot change the current of his fate.”

“That’s a mere high-sounding excuse for cowardice, Dick,” she answered, and touched his arm gently as she spoke. “In your heart you know it is. Those fine similes prove just nothing at all. Don’t make the senseless, lifeless river your excuse. There is no fate for man except what he makes for himself. He is his own master to shape his life to his own liking—to do or not to do as he chooses.”

“But what am I to do, Sophie?” he asked, eager yet irresolute still, “there is no work for me!”

“There is work for every man in the world—honest work,” she answered: “My husband will help you to find it. But you must first put vicious pleasures behind you. There is hope for you yet, Dick; I know it, I

feel it. Let the end of your life redeem the beginning. Give Una cause to be proud of her father; then claim her if you will."

There was a long pause. Neither spoke, and the angry roar of the river grew louder in the silence.

He turned and caught her hand and held it. "You are right," he said, "you are my good angel. You would have made a man of me from the first, if—No! no! I won't speak of that now. I was a selfish coward and I know it. But you have given me back the hope and courage of my old self, and I won't lose my hold again. Before God I swear I will lead a new life from this night forth."

"And I believe you, Dick," she said softly.

Even while they spoke from the blackness of the summer-house behind them a black shadow detached itself. Stealthily, silently, slowly, it took the form of a man with hands stretched out, grotesque, gigantic in the moonlight. Silent as death it moved towards them from behind.

There was a sudden shock; a wild cry in which a man's voice and a woman's mingled. The horrible shadow fell back into the darkness and disappeared, and Dick Spencer and Sophie Bronder went headlong down into the strong, cruel current that closed with a rush over their heads.

Twenty yards down the stream they rose again close together in the wild whirl. Even then Dick Spencer

might perhaps have saved himself if he would, for he was a strong swimmer. But he was no coward, and the only woman that had ever touched his heart was struggling hopelessly beside him. He struck out athwart the current to where her outstretched hands showed white in the moonlight. Three strokes and he reached her. But she clutched him as he came, and again they sank in stifling, strangling water.

They rose again still clinging together, though Sophie was no longer conscious and lay a motionless weight on his arm. She knew not the bitterness of death. He fought for their lives to the last. But the current was fierce and the banks deep and sheer. The rush of the wild water whirled them down-stream. The waves as he faced them buffeted him on the mouth and drove the labouring breath back into his lungs. His struggles grew weaker and weaker, his limbs moved mechanically, till slowly thought and consciousness flickered and went out.

A third time they sank, and when a third time they rose their bodies swayed limp as weeds to the impetus of the stream, and their faces were cold and white and still—the faces of the peaceful dead.

So, helpless as drifting logs, now under the water, now over, but ever clasped in each other's arms, the wild stream hurried them at its own fierce will till the river broadened and the current slackened and wound through low banks at a gentler pace. An overhanging

tree that dipped its branches deep into the eddy caught and held them. So they lay all night—poor chill counterfeits of humanity—motionless, unconscious, more dead than the entangling branches.

The moon waned slowly and darkness followed, and then the soft grey light of the dawn stole on a chill wind over the world, and the sun streaked the horizon with a crimson curtain from which he broke out suddenly resplendent in scarlet and gold, waking the flowers to beauty and the birds to music through all the joyous woods. But music or beauty, or the joy of life, could never more touch the sense or heart of those who lay so still, saddening the dawn with death.

It was high noon when the searchers found them at last, and bore them, still in a last embrace, across the meadows, and through the woods to Oakdale.

Wilfred Bronder stood the shock with an awful calm, more terrible and more deadly than a wild frenzy of grief, and the son and daughter, taught by the instinct of love, hushed their weeping in the presence of a sorrow deeper than their own.

It was Wilfred Bronder's orders that the two who had died together should be buried side by side in the same tomb, and the world—as is its wont—found the worser meaning, and whispered foul calumnies above the grave.

The venomous lying tattle grew and spread—whence issuing no man could say—till the whole country-side

was full of it. With swarming lies it blotted the fame of a pure and virtuous wife and mother. It hinted disgrace and degradation for her son. It outraged the trust of the strong, loyal, broken-hearted husband which had never wavered in faith and love^s for a moment.

From the hour of his wife's death he held himself aloof from the converse and sport of the county which he had freely shared. He lived alone with his son and Una, who had most power to comfort him. None other passed the door but his sister's brother, Randal Thorncroft, and his nephew, Cyril Thorncroft, and the famous scientist, Steven Curson, to whom from the first he had been a generous friend.

Calumny finds and assimilates its own food as poison is distilled from flowers. In Wilfred Bronder's grief it found shame and disgrace. In his tenderness for Una it found doubt and dislike of his own son. Rumours of disinheritance were spread abroad and passed from lips to ear, and ear to lips through all the district, though none could say what lips first uttered them. When some months later Miles, as had been long arranged, left home for Oxford, though the lonely father was heart-broken at the parting, suspicion settled into certainty in the minds of the scandal-mongers.

CHAPTER III

THE ELIXIR OF DEATH

LIFE was monotonous and dull in those days at Oakdale. Mr. Randal Thorncroft was indeed a frequent visitor—almost a resident—in the place, and there was much praise of his kindly solicitude for “poor Bronder.”

Meanwhile, the strange intimacy between the solicitor and the scientist grew and strengthened. Mr. Thorncroft developed a strong amateur interest in the fascinating pursuit of chemistry, and they had many long talks together at Curson’s laboratory.

Mr. Thorncroft’s handsome son came too at rarer intervals, when he could tear himself away from his gay life in London, and made ostentatious love to Una, who grew in beauty day by day, and the gossips’ tongues wagged merrily about the two. But Una gave scant heed to his careless flatteries. Her heart was with her old playmate, Miles, and the broken-hearted father.

To Miles she wrote many long letters, and received many short letters in reply, from which she read the

less confidential passages for the father. She shared, perhaps more than shared, the father's pride at the rumours of the boy's triumphs, though it must be confessed, that the feats recorded were rather of amazing strength than scholarship.

The young girl and the old man—for Wilfred Bronder had aged with grief before his time—were seldom apart. But their pleasant walks in the woods and meadows of Oakdale grew shorter and shorter, and ceased. His health, which to the day of his wife's death had been unbroken by a day's sickness, was failing rapidly. His hair turned white; his face grew gaunt and wrinkled as an old man's. He ate little, and slept badly, and was incapable of exertion. The local doctor, and the eminent and fashionable Sir Charles Nixon—head of his profession—who was brought down from London in consultation, could make nothing of his case.

"He is dying of old age in middle life," Sir Charles said; "there is no disease that I can find of any organ, but every organ is curiously weakened and undermined. He is dying of old age."

"He has had a great grief, doctor," Una answered, as she followed him from the sick man's room. "His wife was drowned a little more than a year ago."

"Ah!" said the sympathetic doctor, "how sad! But grief seldom kills."

"It was something worse than grief this time,

doctor," Mr. Thorncroft added, when Una had gone back to her accustomed place by the sick man's couch, "there was bitter shame and disgrace as well."

Then he told the story, as the world knew it, of Sophie Bronder and Dick Spencer's drowning, and of the finding of the dead clasped in each other's arms. Decorously, he hinted foul suggestions of guilty love and flight.

"Wilfred Bronder, your patient, doctor," he went on, with smooth-toned regret, "was very fond of his only son and heir—a boy named Miles, and proud of him. He has never been quite the same to the boy since the mother's flight and death. Reasonably or unreasonably, who shall say? suspicion was begotten in his mind. Shortly afterwards, the boy was sent away to Oxford. Perhaps it was the best thing that could have been done under the circumstances. You will forgive me mentioning those scandals, Sir Charles, it's no pleasant topic, but I thought, perhaps, it might help your diagnosis."

"You are quite right, and very kind," responded the doctor, "the facts you mention may account for the symptoms. Still the case is peculiar. My good friend Dr. Curtis"—with a bow to the bashful country practitioner—"has treated the symptoms admirably, really admirably. I see nothing to add or alter."

"No," he continued, with deepened professional gravity of voice and manner, in reply to the affectionate

brother's anxious inquiries, "no, I'm afraid, Mr. Thorncroft, we cannot hold out much hope. Dr. Curtis, I am glad to say, agrees with me. I'm glad, I mean of course, to be fortified in my professional opinion by his excellent judgment. The symptoms all point to a fatal termination at an early date. We are all in the hands of Providence, of course ; still—"

"Oh ! thanks very much"—with a side-glance at the figure on the cheque that Mr. Thorncroft slipped unostentatiously into his hand, and he slipped not less unostentatiously into his waistcoat pocket.

"A beautiful place, my dear sir," the doctor added, with perceptible lightening of face and voice as they came out on the broad stone steps under the Ionic portico, and looked over the wide undulating expanse of deer-sprinkled wood and lawn, with the gleam of the treacherous river, gliding snake-like through the covering foliage of distant trees. "Really one of the 'stately homes' of England, 'how splendidly they stand,' that Byron or Shakespeare or Tennyson speaks of. It is a pity that sorrow or sickness should ever visit such scenes—very sad indeed."

But Sir Charles did not seem very sad indeed as he drew on his well-fitting gloves, stepped into a comfortable brougham that was to take him to the railway-station, and showed a smiling face to Mr. Thorncroft as he drove away.

"Prating old fool !" was Mr. Thorncroft's unflattering

ing comment. "Curson was quite right, there is no danger."

Mr. Thorncroft did not go back through the hall door, but skirted the house to where a long low building—once the cloister of a great Benedictine abbey—with narrow Gothic windows and beetle-browed doors, stretched away to the right. At the furthest of those doors he stopped, fitted a key to the lock, went down a narrow stone corridor—the flags worn smooth and glossy as black marble—and tapped lightly four taps in quick succession at another thick door at the end.

There was the noise of tinkling glass and of heavy footsteps within. A key turned smoothly in the lock, and the huge gaunt figure of Steven Curson showed in the low entrance, stooped almost double that he might look through.

"Come in!" he said gruffly, when he had made sure of his visitor.

It was a large and perfectly equipped laboratory, pleasantly cool though the sun was hot outside, by reason of its narrow windows and thick stone walls. Once upon a time it had been the refectory of the monks. The huge laboratory spoke of a scientist who had made all science his province. There was one long wall of shelves, on which the bottles, huge retorts and crucibles of the chemist, were neatly arranged. At the opposite side were all the latest appliances of the electrical engineer. A group of cameras of various

shapes and sizes showed that photography was not neglected. A heavy oak book-case crammed full, with brass grating across the glass, stood in a deep recess.

Yet was it not the room of a mere ascetic searcher of the truth. Luxury was not sacrificed to science. The laboratory was comfortable as it was commodious. The stone floor was covered with a thick cocoa-nut matting, the easy-chairs were spring-cushioned, large and low.

Curson had been deep in some chemical experiment when the knock came. His big office chair, with circular cushion to catch the shoulders comfortably, stood opposite a circular marble-topped table, on which there were bottles half full, test-tubes, retorts, and a spirit-lamp still burning.

"I hope I don't interrupt anything important," Mr. Thorncroft said, with a glance at the table and implements.

"It's all right, another time will do for that," Curson said brusquely. He touched the extinguisher and the lamp went out.

Thorncroft, who seemed familiar with the room and the ways of its master, dropped without another word into a deep leather-covered chair near a low table between the windows.

Without a word Curson took from an oak cupboard in an angle of the wall a box of cigars, a flask of old brandy, a soda syphon, and glasses, and set them

methodically on the table. The two men lit their cigars and mixed their drinks, and puffed and sipped for a moment or two in dead silence.

"Well?" asked Curson at last.

"It's all right," Thorncroft answered softly, twisting the loosening corner of the leaf on his cigar end as he spoke. "He knows nothing, suspects nothing—the fool prates about dying of premature old age."

"Of course," Curson retorted contemptuously, "what does your fashionable physician—your routine pulse-feeler and temperature-taker—know of science? Yet the man is not altogether a fool either. It is old age that is killing Bronder, though he is not old. Every organ is enervated, worn out—so the man dies. If every organ were re-invigorated he might live for ever. Surely it is as possible for omnipotent science to prolong life as to shorten it, if we could but find the means."

His voice took a deeper tone, and a light smouldered in his deep-set eyes, as he touched the subject that absorbed his thoughts.

Mr. Thorncroft hastened to turn him from the dangerous topic.

"There is time enough for all that afterwards," he said, "but we have urgent work before us. How long do you think he can live?"

"How long do you desire? I am his providence."

"The sooner the better if we had the will made—the will we want."

"That's your task," said Curson shortly, "I have done mine."

"Not quite, my friend," Thorncroft retorted testily, "you promised to help me in this too."

"Yes, if I could, but I cannot. I guessed from the first it was a hopeless experiment. I know Bronder's steady, resolute will. There are few subjects I cannot dominate, but hypnotism is quite hopeless with him."

"I have thought of a plan," said Thorncroft musingly, "it seems so simple that I fear to trust it, and yet it seems feasible, and I see no other way."

"The most ingenious contrivance is the simplest," said Curson. "Do you intend to——"

But Thorncroft cut the question sharply off in the middle.

"There is no need to trouble you with my intentions," he said. "I don't need your help in this. It is fortunate that Bronder is as keen on having the will made at once as I am. He has fixed the day after to-morrow. Will his mind be quite clear the day after to-morrow?"

"Do you wish it quite clear?" Curson flashed him a glance of sardonic inquiry, and waved off the cloud of tobacco smoke that he might have a clear view of his face. He was puzzled about Thorncroft's new plan. But the other sipped his brandy-and-soda imperturbably and answered, "Quite clear; let there be no mistake about that, please. He has sent for Lord Morton and

Sir Percival Foreman to witness his will. They are not men easy to deceive."

"Will your plan suffice to deceive them?" Curson asked with a lurking sneer.

"I must only try, since you won't help me."

"Cannot, you mean."

"Have it so," Thorncroft retorted scornfully. "Well, cannot, if you will; it comes to the same thing in the result."

For a second the two men eyed each other—a mutual hatred lurked in their glance like the glint of opposing steel.

Thorncroft, the cooler and the deadlier of the two, recovered himself first.

"I know of course," he added slowly, "that you are anxious to help me if you could."

"Ready and willing," Curson answered sullenly. "I have proved it, I think, and may prove it again. What hour did you say?"

"I said no hour. Two in the afternoon is fixed, but I won't trouble you about that."

"It is necessary I should be there," the other persisted still sullenly.

An angry answer trembled on Thorncroft's lips—an answer that he knew would compel submission. But he stifled it. "His presence can do no harm if it does no good," he thought—and he sipped his glass and puffed his cigar before he answered cordially, "By all

means, if you think so. I shall be very glad, of course."

They shook hands at parting, a lying token of restored friendship. As the big bony paw of Curson crushed his small dapper white hand, Thorncroft noticed not for the first time the brown and yellow stains on the long strong fingers. They were the trade-marks of the chemist, he knew, but they sent a little cold shiver through him, they looked so like the stains of blood.

Meanwhile Una had crept back to her accustomed place in the sick man's room. She made no sound, for he seemed asleep. She took up the book she had been reading, *The Bride of Lammermoor* as it chanced, turned a little in her chair so as to get the light full on the page, and was soon absorbed in the ordeal of the heroine. The room was dead silent—so silent that the twitter of the birds in the summer trees and the faint rustle of the leaves, and the drone of the honey bee, came distinct through the half-open window. Una read on absorbed, fascinated by the story. But even at the most absorbing moment, when Lucy just trembles on the verge of her pitiful fate, some instinct told the reader that the patient's eyes were on her face, and the imaginative sorrow merged instantly into the real.

"Una!" he said feebly, as she put the book softly down, "there are a few words I want to say to you."

She came closer to him as he spoke, for his voice was very feeble—the voice of an old man.

"Una! I am dying. I saw it in the doctor's face a little while ago. I feel it—I know it. My life is slowly ebbing away. Don't look so sad, my dear little girl, I am not sorry to die. The better half of my life I lost more than a year ago. I have but one strong wish left for this world. It was her wish—it is mine. Can you guess what that wish is, Una?"

A faint blush stole into her pale cheek and a softer light dawned in her eyes, but she did not speak.

His eyes were steady on her face. "You are very young, my darling, but love comes often to the young, and young love is best. *Her* eyes were very quick—it may be that hope deceived them—but even as boy and girl she thought you were learning to love each other—was she right, Una?"

The flush deepened on her cheek and the tears gathered in her eyes. Suddenly she covered her hot face with her hands and wept silently.

"He will make you a good husband, my girl—honest and strong, tender and true. There is a saint in Heaven that prays, I know, for your happiness together."

The flushed face was suddenly buried in the coverlet, the girlish figure was shaken with sobs. There was no other answer.

In a moment the faint voice was heard again—tender as a woman's. "It is a hard thing I would ask

you. Una. A young girl is shy of her heart's secrets. But I am dying, and it would comfort me to know—I should die happy if I knew—— Of his love I am sure, for he has told me. Do you love him, Una? Can you love him?"

He patted the soft hair gently, feebly, as he spoke, with thin transparent hand.

She raised her tear-stained face suddenly and looked him in the eyes, and he read the answer he longed for.

" You will wire him, Una, to come at once. I cannot last long, and I want to see him before I die."

She nodded. She could not trust herself to speak.

With a deep sigh of relief and contentment the dying man—who had half raised himself in his excitement—sank back on his pillows, and Una fled weeping to her own room, full of a grief that even love's soft whisperings failed to comfort, for death is very terrible to the young.

CHAPTER IV

'WHERE THERE'S A WILL THERE'S A WAY'

"YOU are a long time writing, Randal," said the voice from the bed a little impatiently. "I wish it very short, and there is no time to lose."

"I have almost done," Mr. Thorncroft answered soothingly, "and it is very short, as you desire."

He was in the room of the dying man, writing at a little table at the farthest corner from the bed, where Una sat in her accustomed seat. Wilfred Bronder's eyes were full of feverish impatience, but he did not speak again, and the quill pen scratched on noisily in the silent room.

Presently Mr. Thorncroft blotted the paper he was writing, and came across the room holding it in his hand. "Read it," he said to the other, and he raised a blind as he spoke and let a flood of soft morning light fall upon the bed.

Wilfred Bronder took the paper eagerly with hand that trembled. It was a will on one small sheet written throughout in Mr. Thorncroft's neat, clear,

peculiar handwriting, yet hardly with Mr. Thorncroft’s customary care and neatness. Three different blots of ink had fallen and stained the paper.

Mr. Bronder read the will from the first word to the last with scrupulous care.

“It is just what I wished,” he said at last, “I think they will both be pleased. Forgive me, Randal, if I was a little impatient just now. I count my time by minutes, you know.”

“You must not say that,” Thorncroft answered cheerily, “you will live to see us all down yet. But all the same you are right about the will. It is an ease to the mind and a help to the body to have things settled. Professionally I have always found it so. Shall I call in the witnesses? They are in the next room.” He had suddenly grown as impatient as Mr. Bronder himself.

At the touch of a silver gong that stood by the bedside Lord Morton and Sir Percival Foreman came together into the room. Steven Curson followed them uninvited, like a huge skulking shadow.

Mr. Thorncroft secretly beckoned him back. He took no notice, but stood apart in a corner watching silently.

Together Lord Morton and Sir Percival Foreman went forward to the bedside, stepping softly on the soft carpet. They bowed courteously to Una who stood aside.

"Sorry to see you bowled over in this way, Bronder," said his bluff, genial lordship. "You do look a bit cut up, and no wonder, but we hope to see you all right again soon."

Sir Percival—keen, shrewd, kindly Sir Percival—looked in his friend's face and read death there unmistakably written. He touched the thin hand softly in sympathy and friendship, but said nothing.

"Mr. Bronder, as I have told you gentlemen, wishes to make his will," Mr. Thorncroft interposed briskly; "he was specially anxious that you two should be the witnesses, so I took the liberty of sending for you."

"No liberty at all," said Lord Morton, "you were quite right. It gives us great pleasure, I am sure—I may speak for Sir Percival as for myself—to oblige our poor friend in any way."

"You have read the will, Bronder," Sir Percival asked, glancing at the paper in the feeble hand, "it expresses your intentions?"

"I read it this moment just before you came in, I am reading it again." Then after a pause, "It was written from my directions by my brother-in-law, Mr. Thorncroft. It expresses my desires and intentions in every particular."

Mr. Thorncroft carried a flat writing-pad to the bed. Then he helped Una to lift Mr. Bronder upon the pillows. He was awkward in this and once let him

slip back. Curson made a step forward as if to help, but Thorncroft motioned him aside imperiously.

At last Una got Mr. Bronder raised and comfortably propped by pillows. Mr. Thorncroft set the writing-pad on the bed, spread the will smoothly on the pad, dipped the pen in the ink, and put it into Mr. Bronder’s hand.

Slowly and feebly, with an almost painful effort, he wrote his name at foot at the spot indicated by Mr. Thorncroft’s pointing finger, and sank back amongst the pillows. The witnesses leant over the bed and signed in turn. Then Mr. Thorncroft briskly blotted the paper, folded it, fitted it neatly in an envelope which he sealed, and presented it to Sir Percival Foreman.

“But you had best keep it, Thorncroft,” Sir Percival said, “it will be more regular.”

“I think not, Sir Percival,” replied Mr. Thorncroft eagerly. “We both think not. Mr. Bronder is especially anxious you should retain it.” The dying man nodded assent—there was entreaty in his eyes.

“You will find the reason, Sir Percival,” Mr. Thorncroft added in a whisper, “when the will comes to be opened and read.”

There was no more to be done. Sir Percival put the envelope in his breast-pocket and the two witnesses fidgeted to depart, leaving the dying man alone with his own people. They touched softly the withered

fingers that lay limp in the coverlet—a dismal parody of a handshake—and passed awkwardly from the room as if conscious of some wrong-doing or lack of sympathy in their departure.

As Mr. Thorncroft shut the door softly after them, Steven Curson—who stood close by—noticed a small edge of paper protrude from his pocket. Instantly the long fingers of the scientist—quick and dexterous from delicate manipulations—transferred the paper unnoticed from Mr. Thorncroft's pocket to his own.

At the same moment the dying man's voice was heard from the bed, feebler than before.

"Randal!" it said, "I want to thank you again. You have taken a load off my mind. Thanks and good-bye, should this chance to be my last word to you, for I grow very feeble and tremble on the verge between this world and the next."

"Curson!—don't I see Curson standing by there in the shadow?—good-bye. I am going where all the secrets of science are open. I will need your help no more."

The two men went together close to the bed and made believe to shake the feeble hand. Thorncroft would have spoken some cheerful words of hope, but the lie was frozen on his lips by the sight of death manifest in the man's face.

There the two stood, silent and glum, till the dying man's voice spoke again a little impatiently, "Good-bye, good-bye. I want a word with Una alone."

Even then Thorncroft seemed reluctant to move, and glanced aside at the table where the writing materials lay. But Curson guessed his thoughts and answered them.

“It’s quite safe,” he said in a whisper, with a side glance at the bed, “he cannot write—an hour more is the most.”

As they passed out, closing the door after them, Curson’s fingers touched an electric button hidden behind the edge of the heavy curtains that covered the door.

Mr. Thorncroft nodded approval.

“You have bettered the old proverb, Curson,” he said; “those walls have ears and eyes as well.” So they passed together through long corridors to Curson’s laboratory.

Meanwhile Una, as the door closed behind them, crept softly to the bedside and took the poor weak hand in both hers, warm with young life, and fondled it gently, tenderly as a baby’s.

“Una!”

“Yes, father, I am listening,” and she bent her head still lower to catch the faint sounds.

“It will not hurt you, my dear child, that I have put something of what I spoke to you in my will. Do not blush, Una—there is no need to blush, if you really love him. Love is something to be proud of, not ashamed. But I have not forced or bound or

hurried you in my will. You must have a free choice and full time to make it. I have asked no promise, Una."

His eyes were full of silent entreaty.

"But it would please you, father," she said shyly, forcing herself to speak, "you are sure it would please you?"

"It is my last wish—my only wish in this world. My whole heart is set upon it."

"Then I promise," she said bravely, in spite of the blushes and tears that started suddenly to cheek and eyes as she spoke, "it will be for him to choose."

"And he, I know, has already chosen. My little girl, you have made me very happy. I pray God your own happiness will reward you. I am very tired, Una, and would like to sleep for a little. Don't speak again, but hold my hand. Your promise will be your last word to me."

After a while his eyes closed softly and he slept, and sleep carried him softly on to death, for he woke no more.

"The hour has passed," said Mr. Thorncroft suddenly. He and Curson had sat for a long while in moody silence.

"And his life has passed with it," Curson answered. "Science makes no mistakes."

"Then all is safe," cried Thorncroft, "for the will is—" He broke his sentence off suddenly with a

fiercely muttered curse, for he had thrust his hands mechanically in his pockets and missed the paper that Curson had purloined.

The other eyed him furtively.

“ Damnation ! ” Thorncroft growled, “ it is gone.”

“ What is gone ? ” Curson asked, holding the paper tight in his pocket as he spoke, “ the will ? ”

“ No ! no ! not the will. Sir Percival has the real will, you saw me give it to him ; you saw Bronder sign it. But I have lost a most important document. I dropped it somewhere in the room or in the passage. I must go back at once to look for it.”

He went back swiftly along the corridor, with searching eyes on the ground—Curson following—but there was no paper there.

He knocked sharply at the door. There was no answer. Again he knocked with a hollow sound. Again no answer. He turned the handle hastily and went in. Curson, still following, pushed the electric knob the other way as he passed. “ Its work is done,” he said.

There was the dead silence in the room, for death was there, and by the bedside Una, still as death, praying.

But Thorncroft’s impatience had no respect for grief or death or prayer.

“ Una ! ” he cried loudly, “ I have lost an important paper—have you seen it ? You must have seen it.

It is no use to any one but myself. Give it to me at once!"

She started as one whose sleep is broken suddenly.

"He is dead!" she said simply, "and I was praying."

"But still——" he began again. Then prudence conquered his impatience and he glanced hastily round the room. There was no paper anywhere.

"Well! well! it is really of no importance anyway," he said with a quick assumption of carelessness, "of no legal or binding force whatever."

"I wonder if she has found it?" was his thought, "she looks so unconscious."

"I wonder what it means?" was Curson's thought, "he looks so frightened."

They passed from the room together, leaving Una again alone with the grim, blank mockery of life that is called death, with the poor, pitiful, empty husk of a soul she loved.

CHAPTER V

THE DISINHERITED

THERE were in the laboratory three days later, Curson and Thorncroft on the morning of the funeral.

"Is it safe to bring that young cub here?" Curson asked sulkily.

"Quite safe and right and proper," Thorncroft answered. "He will be late for the funeral and in time for the reading of the will. He will create exactly the impression we desire. I wish I had no other trouble than that."

"The missing paper again?" asked Curson, with swift, shrewd glance under his lids.

"Yes, the missing paper again," Thorncroft answered testily. "It is of no real consequence of course, still I would give a great deal to know what has become of it. I would give a great deal to know that girl did not pick it up when we left the room."

"That last is easily managed," Curson said; "you forget we have a record of all that has been said or done while we were away."

He set up a white screen at the end of the room, snapped off the electric light to sudden darkness and let a vivid light from a strange-shaped lantern flare on the screen.. There was a buzz of swift wheels in motion, then instantly the death-chamber came out on the white screen with the figure of Mr. Bronder in the bed and of Una close beside. This was no vulgar cinematograph, it was reproduction lifelike as life itself: every motion, every colour, every whisper of their voices was faithfully reproduced. Mr. Thorncroft heard the dying man's last words with a cynical smile. He saw Una fall on her knees beside the bed. A moment later he saw his own figure burst "in motion as he lived" into the room. Then suddenly the vision vanished.

"Are you satisfied?" asked the deep voice of Curson, out of the darkness.

"Perfectly," Thorncroft said, "perfectly satisfied that she at least has not touched the paper; perfectly satisfied and very grateful to you, my dear Curson."

The electric light shot into life again and showed Curson eyeing him sardonically. "I want you to prove your gratitude," he said; "I have kept my part of the bargain."

"And I have not forgotten mine. When the property, or any part of it, comes to my son's hands, you are to have a third. You have my son's signature to the deed and mine, but you must have a little

patience, Curson. The obligations are not wholly on one side. At any moment I might if I chose——”

Curson gave him a sudden look of a wild beast chained and savage. He cut short his smooth phrases with the snarl of a wild beast.

“I am not likely to forget,” he growled.

“Very well then,” returned Mr. Thorncroft blandly, “we’ll say no more about it for the present.”

The whole country-side was at the funeral, and the absence of the only son of the dead man created much whispering and surmise.

After the funeral a small party assembled in the library for the reading of the will, including Lord Morton and Sir Percival Foreman, Mr. Thorncroft and his son Cyril.

Sir Percival produced the envelope, broke the seals and handed the will to Mr. Thorncroft.

Mr. Thorncroft adjusted his gold spectacles and unfolded the paper to read, when suddenly the door opened and Miles Bronder walked quietly into the room.

He seemed like one stunned and dizzy with a heavy fall or blow, and he passed his hand constantly before his eyes as though to push away something that was not there.

“Good-morning, Sir Percival,” he said in a vague, hesitating way, “good-morning, Lord Morton. I have just heard outside that my father is dead. It is very sad—is it not?”

It was pitiable to see the comely face so void of all expression, to hear this splendid young fellow—a giant in bone and muscle—speak in the dull hesitating monotone of a child that stammers through a meaningless lesson learned by rote.

"For God's sake pull yourself together, Miles," said Sir Percival; "there is dust on your clothes, your hand is bruised and bleeding—what has happened to you?"

"I think I fell just now," Miles answered in the same dull voice, "when James said to me on the doorstep, 'Your father is dead.'"

"But you knew your poor father was dead, my boy," Lord Morton said, laying a kindly hand on his shoulder. He had seen men like this before, stunned by a heavy fall in the hunting-field.

"I had a wire yesterday to say come at once. That was all."

Mr. Thorncroft smiled a pitying, half-incredulous smile. "His sister—Miss Spencer, I mean—wrote and wired repeatedly, I understand, at his father's request, but got no reply. It is very sad."

But now Una, who had sat silent and motionless with eyes and ears intent on Miles, a very picture of pity, cried out, "You never got my letters, Miles; I knew you never got them, or you would have answered them and come."

The sound of her eager voice seemed to rouse him to clearer consciousness and remembrance. Twice he

passed his hands impatiently before his face as if he would clear a veil away.

"Una!" he said at last.

She crossed the room before them all and took his big hand softly in both hers and fondled it.

Her lips quivered piteously, her eyes filled, and she burst into a passion of tears.

Gradually he found his grief in hers. As he watched her weeping, the dull stunned look faded from his face.

"It was terribly sudden, Una," he said, in an awe-struck whisper, "I never had a line. Even now I cannot feel that it is true that I shall never see him in this world again."

"It is very sad, of course," said Mr. Thorncroft's matter-of-fact voice, "and very unfortunate, and indeed unaccountable that all these letters and wires miscarried, and that Miles should have had no news of his father's death till now. But perhaps we had best, as he is here, proceed with the business we have in hand. The will is very short; it will only take a few moments to read."

Sir Percival nodded. Mr. Thorncroft wiped and readjusted his gold spectacles, and read the will in a clear formal voice, making every word heard.

There were a few legacies to old servants and attendants. To begin with: £1000 to Steven Curson as a token of admiration, and £1000 to Randal Thorncroft as a token of regard.

Then Mr. Thorncroft came quickly to the body of the will. Then he read on slowly—

“And I hereby devise and bequeath all my real and personal estate to my beloved nephew, Cyril Thorncroft, who has always been to me the best of sons, on condition that within one year from the date of this will he marries Una Spencer, whom I have always loved as a daughter, and I hereby declare that such marriage is the last and dearest wish of my heart, and that I have reason to believe that the prospect is pleasing to both. But in default of such marriage within the said term of one year, I will and direct that all my said property be equally divided between them.

“In witness whereof I, the said Wilfred Bronder, have to this my will set my hand on this 12th day of May, 1900.

“WILFRED BRONDER.

“Signed and acknowledged by the above-named Wilfred Bronder as his will in the presence of us present at the same time, who in his presence and in the presence of each other have hereunto subscribed our names as witnesses.

“MORTON.

“SIR PERCIVAL FOREMAN, BART.”

There was a long pause after the will was read. It was broken by the voice of Miles Bronder, no longer feeble or confused, but full of concentrated passion. "It's a lie!" he said bluntly, "an insult to my father's memory. My father never wrote that will; he never signed it."

Mr. Thorncroft was quite unmoved.

"Miles is naturally annoyed and excited," he said suavely, appealing to the others; "we must make some allowance for language otherwise unpardonable."

"Miles!" he added reprovingly, "you forget yourself. It is Lord Morton and Sir Percival Foreman you insult. They are the witnesses to the will."

"Then my father did not know what he was signing," Miles persisted.

"Forgive me, Miles," said Sir Percival Foreman, very kindly, yet gravely too, "I grieve to say you are wrong there. Your father told me that he had just read the will. I saw him with my own eyes read it again the moment before he signed, and we witnessed it. He was as clear in his mind as I am now. It grieves me to believe this of my old friend. I would have remonstrated with him if I had known. I certainly would have refused to be a witness to such a will, but neither your feeling nor mine, Miles, can alter the facts."

"I'm deuced sorry for you, my poor boy," Lord Morton blurted out, "I am, upon my soul. But there

is no use making a row about it. *It is an infernal shame, I must say that much. One does not like to say anything about the dead, still—*"

"I won't believe it; I cannot believe it!" insisted Miles. "It's not the property I care about, but I won't believe he cast me off like this. Look at the will, Sir Percival. Look at it, Lord Morton! Is it the same you witnessed?"

"It is certainly the same," Sir Percival answered, as he took the will in his hands. There was no mistaking the signatures, the neat writing of Mr. Thorncroft, even the blots of ink on the paper.

"Read it! Read it again, uncle," Miles urged; "there must be some mistake somewhere!"

"Read it for yourself," said Sir Percival gently, and put the paper into his hands.

Miles read on to the words, "and I have reason to believe that the prospect is pleasing to both."

Then he broke out afresh. "There is some trickery here. It is not the property I care about, I swear it, but—"

He checked himself suddenly, and strove hard to speak calmly.

"Una!" he said, making direct appeal to her for the first time, where she stood pale and wild-eyed with amazement and terror. "Una! you surely don't believe this to be my father's will? You know it is a lie."

"I hardly know what to believe, Miles," she faltered

out. "I saw him sign it, saw him read it just before he signed, and yet——"

"And yet you know it is a fraud," he interrupted wildly. "You too in the conspiracy! I see. Perhaps the will is right, after all." He glanced fiercely round at the *débonnaire* Cyril, and his strong fingers twitched as though he longed to lay angry hands on him. "Pleasing to both—yes, pleasing to both," he cried scornfully, "but the governor never, never wrote it. I'd not believe it of him for devil or angel."

He dashed the paper on the ground, and flung out of the room in a very whirlwind of rage.

CHAPTER VI

A HITCH

THERE was dead silence when Miles had broken away.

Una slipped like a shadow through another door and fled to her own room, where her overcharged heart found relief in woman's blessed privilege of—tears.

The men stood awkwardly gazing at each other. Such is the power of earnestness, that even Lord Morton and Sir Percival Foreman had a vague, uneasy, utterly irrational feeling that they were engaged in some conspiracy. Cyril Thorncroft vacantly twirled his moustache with eyes fixed on the door through which Una fled. Mr. Thorncroft alone—bland and imperturbable—had complete mastery of himself.

He spoke again after a decent pause. "It is very sad, Sir Percival, very sad indeed, my lord. We must be patient with that poor young fellow. Whatever good reasons Mr. Bronder may have had for his will, whoever else may have been to blame—and I am the last man to speak evil of the dead—poor Miles is not

surely responsible, and he is the sufferer. I trust when his passion cools down he will allow me to help him."

But Sir Percival and Lord Morton looked about for their hats and coats, still full of a vague uneasiness. No one was to blame, they said, of course; but they were sorry that they had had, however unwittingly, a hand in the business.

As they went together down the great stone steps, they found Miles tramping the broad gravel sweep in front, like a wild animal.

They were a little doubtful of his greeting. But he met them with frank repentance.

"I beg your pardon, Lord Morton, and yours, Sir Percival," he said, as he shook their hands cordially. "I made a fool and a beast of myself just now. Of course I know that everything is fair and square, so far as you two are concerned. I don't blame any one. I don't see my own way in the least. But it is still firm on my mind that the poor governor never made a will like that, and the truth will come out somehow. I am just walking up and down here for a bit till I cool down enough to have a word with my uncle and the others."

In ten minutes he had cooled sufficiently, he thought, to go slowly up the steps he had gone down so hurriedly.

In the hall were Steven Curson and Cyril Thorncroft talking and laughing together—rather, Cyril talked

and laughed, and Curson listened. "Serve him right," were the first words that Miles Bronder heard as he re-crossed the threshold of his home. "Serve him jolly right, for all the world knows he's no better than a—"

The vile word was hardly spoken when Miles' hand was on the collar of his coat. In that strong grip the well-fitting garment ripped like paper. He shook the frightened Cyril fiercely as a naughty child might shake its rag doll, till the words came through the chattering teeth in a meaningless gabble.

But Steven Curson—his sullen temper roused—turned savagely on Miles and struck him heavily on the breast. Curson was a strong man, but he might as well have struck the stone pillar of the portico.

Miles instantly loosening his hold on Cyril, gripped his assailant by the throat, and with a mighty push, as an athlete shoves a weight from the shoulder, sent him reeling and staggering across the hall to fall a crumpled heap at the door.

For a moment the young fellow stood a rigid figure of young Hercules, every muscle tense with rage. At that moment the parlour door opened softly, and Mr. Thorncroft appeared at the threshold.

He cast an angry look at Curson, who was gathering himself together from his fall while the rumpled Cyril crept away unobserved.

"Miles!" said the old man gently, "I would be glad

to have a word with you,"—and Miles followed him, a little shamefacedly, into the parlour.

"Sit down, sit down," he said more kindly than before, "I can hardly expect you to believe me when I say that what has happened to-day is as great a grief to me as it can be to you."

There is something particularly touching in the kindness of undemonstrative men. Mr. Thorncroft spoke gently—almost humbly—as if pleading for pardon. His white hair gave a certain dignity to this humble pleading. Miles' anger ebbed swiftly away.

"I hardly know what to believe, sir," he said, "the whole thing is such a horrible surprise to me!"

"And to me," Mr. Thorncroft responded, "though I knew of course for some time back that my son was engaged to Miss Una Spencer."

Miles started, and a sound between a growl and a groan broke from him, but by a strong effort, with clenched teeth and hands, he held his passion down, for he found Mr. Thorncroft's eyes on him, shrewd yet pitying.

"I'm sorry," he said, after a short pause, "I did not know how you felt. This makes it harder for you, Miles. But surely you might have guessed. My son Cyril is a man whom few girls could resist." The father's pride showed in his voice, and stung poor Miles almost to madness.

"Your son Cyril," he began furiously, "is a——"

But manliness conquered. He could not tell that gentle old man to his face what he thought of his son. So he choked the words back, burying his face in his hands.

For a second the father's face darkened and hardened in rigid lines, but his voice was as gentle as ever when he spoke.

"I cannot blame you that you should think hardly of Cyril for the moment," he said, "for he is the instrument—unconscious though it be—of much injustice and suffering to you. Both he and I are anxious to make what atonement is in our power. Your future will be my special care. Whatever money you require or desire will——"

But Miles bluntly broke in on his smooth assurance.

"Mr. Thorncroft," he said simply, "you are very kind, and I thank you for your kindness. But I can accept nothing from you or your son. I tell you plainly I believe there has been some devilment somewhere."

Mr. Thorncroft looked pained.

"I don't believe you have had any hand in it, sir, but I cannot and will not believe my poor father would have done this thing of his own accord. The truth will come out some day. Meanwhile, I will go my own way with help from no one, to sink or swim as God pleases."

"I am very sorry," Mr. Thorncroft replied softly as

ever. "I cannot blame your suspicion, though I believe it to be unfounded."

"Can I see Una—Miss Spencer, before I go?" Miles asked abruptly.

"Certainly, certainly," was the prompt reply. Then after a moment's hesitation, "Yes, certainly, I'm quite sure it can be arranged if you desire it, and it will be perhaps best for all concerned that there should be a full and clear understanding."

"Do you mean, sir, that Una would not like to see me?" Miles asked with a quiver in his voice, "that she would not care even to say good-bye?"

"No! no! it is not that," Mr. Thorncroft answered kindly, "you must not think it is anything like that. Miss Spencer entertains the kindest feeling for you personally, quite a sisterly affection. I understand from my son Cyril that she feels she has treated you rather hardly. A young girl is not always mistress of her own heart. May I ask if she has written to you lately?"

Then Miles remembered with a sudden chill at his heart that he had no word from Una of his father's approaching death, no summons to his side.

"I do not desire to distress you," Mr. Thorncroft continued smoothly, with keen eyes on his face, "but, to prevent disappointment, you must realize that under existing circumstances an interview cannot fail to be painful to Miss Spencer. All the same she has

too much common-sense, too strong a feeling of justice and duty, I'm sure, to refuse your request."

"I shan't trouble her," said Miles shortly—he felt his temper slipping from his control—"nor you, sir, either. Thanks all the same, and good-bye."

"You have no message to leave?" asked Mr. Thorncroft.

"None."

So he passed from his father's door and down the avenue, without looking back, and he did not see the pale, tear-stained face at Una's window that watched him go.

Next day Mr. Thorncroft had a long interview with Una, and the next after a short interview with his son.

Cyril Thorncroft's dressing-room was dainty and luxurious as a lady's boudoir, and as handsome a figure as ever plagued a lady's heart was Cyril Thorncroft himself in his dressing-jacket of dark-blue velvet, as he lounged in an easy-chair after a late breakfast.

The father regarded his handsome son with unaffected admiration. He was the image of the handsome wife whom he had loved as only men love whose affections are concentrated to a point.

"Well, Cyril," he said, as he dropped into an arm-chair and took and lit a choice cigar that his son negligently offered, "I have good news for you. I think the girl will come round—I may say I know the

girl will come round after a decent interval. I flatter myself I have managed father and daughter with some skill. I congratulate you, my boy, in getting at one stroke, without the least trouble to yourself, the biggest fortune, the finest place, and the most beautiful girl in the county."

But Cyril looked rather perturbed than delighted. "Yes," he said slowly, between the puffs of his cigar, "the money is nice and the place is nice, and the girl is the nicest of all. 'Pon my soul, I'm getting fonder of her every day, and I'd be particularly pleased to have a cut at that young cub Miles. But——"

"But what?" asked the father impatiently.

"There's a little difficulty in the way."

"Difficulty! there's none. I tell you the girl will consent."

"Oh! the little difficulty I speak of is on my side, not hers—I never expected much difficulty from her. There! there! governor, you needn't be so confoundedly impatient. Perhaps I'd best make a clean breast of it. Then you must know that, not to put too fine a point on it, I'm married already."

"Married!" the father gasped out and sank back in his chair.

The son smoked imperturbably. "You don't ask your daughter-in-law's name," he said after a pause.

"And I don't care to know," the father retorted sullenly; "I don't see that it makes much matter."

"But it does, so I'll tell you without asking; it's Daisy Mordaunt."

"Daisy Mordaunt the actress?"

"Well, I don't know about the acting, but she's the best dancer in London and sings the jolliest, spiciest songs and has the neatest figure, and I ought to know that."

"I remember the woman now," said the father, "a woman with tawny eyes and full lips and red gold curls, small—"

"But plump," Cyril interposed. "Her figure was always Daisy's strong point. That's the girl."

"Oh! you fool!" cried the father bitterly, "what in the devil's name tempted you to marry that penniless, vicious vixen?"

But Cyril was not the least disturbed. "Couldn't help it," he answered with easy philosophy. "I saw her dance at the 'Imperial' and got mashed, and—and then there wasn't any other way, so I married her at the registry, and she promised to keep it dark, and she did. She *is* a vixen though, you're quite right there, governor. I was dead sick of her tantrums before we were a month married. So I don't see that it should interfere with our other arrangements. Una is a deal better looking."

"Do you suggest bigamy?" asked the father, with a sneer.

"Not precisely," answered Cyril airily, "I have no

taste for his Majesty's big wheel. Not bigamy, gov., but divorce. I haven't been exactly the best of husbands to my Daisy. It's a pity there's such a lot of nice-looking girls in the world. Daisy has cut up rough about it and threatened a divorce a score of times. I've always coaxed her off up to this, I didn't want the blooming row, and I've only to coax her on next time—see?"

"I doubt it," said his father gloomily. "That woman with the full lips and smouldering eyes is not one to be coaxed. There is a devil in the woman, and if she's fond of you she'll stick to you and give trouble. Still I suppose it's worth trying."

"Oh! never you fear, I know how to manage her," said Cyril confidently. "Meanwhile the beautiful Una must wait."

"Yes, Una must wait," the father assented. "Fortunately, we have got a full year before us."

CHAPTER VII

THE FAIRY GODFATHER

IT was a fortnight later, and close to midnight, as Miles Bronder plodded up the slope of Trafalgar Square past Morley's hotel, when a yellow bus—the last for the night—went by. He hesitated for a moment whether he should walk or drive. A fine rain was falling. He sprinted up the slope after the bus and leaped on the footboard. There was only one inside seat vacant at the furthest end from the door, and he passed awkwardly enough down the double row of passengers, and took it. But at the next stopping-place he saw under the gas-lamp a woman, pale, poorly dressed, with a young child in her arms, waiting in the rain that was now beginning to fall more heavily.

"No room inside, mum," he heard the conductor say civilly enough.

Instantly he plunged from his seat and blundered down the narrow lane of passengers, bruising many toes and followed by many growls as he passed.

"I beg your pardon," he said at the door, "she can have my seat, conductor?" and he helped the pale-faced woman into the bus.

"You can stand here, sir, if you like, in the shelter," the conductor said, as Miles prepared to mount the corkscrew staircase, "it's raining real heavy."

Miles thanked him, and stood in shelter on the platform.

"Nasty night, sir," said the conductor. It was most assuredly a nasty night. The sky rained and the ground steamed and the lights showed dull yellow blotches through the thick air. The wet streets were empty as they passed, even the night birds seemed to have flown to their unsavoury nests.

Not all! For as the bus swung and jolted round the corner into the Seven Dials, a cry, "Help! murder! police!" came faintly to their ears.

Miles started, and the friendly conductor laid a restraining hand on his arm.

"Never you mind them, sir," he said, "you'll get bashed for your trouble. There's a bad lot hereabouts. It's a job for the police as is paid for it."

"Help! murder! murder!" The cry came again, and Miles shook off the conductor's arm and leaped from the platform splash into the murky street, and stood listening.

Help! help! He darted towards the entrance of a laneway to the right. Half-way down three figures

struggled, vague and huge in the fog. In a moment he was amongst them.

Two big men were attacking one small one, who with marvellous agility kept them at bay by quick thrusts at their faces with the sharp nozzle of his umbrella, while all the time he leaped nimbly from side to side, and shouted lustily.

But the unequal fight ended suddenly. One big hand clutched the umbrella, another gripped the small man's throat, and his cry died in a gurgle.

Miles shouted as he came. He was not used to the ways of London roughs, whose rule is a word and a blow—the blow first. Without a word the second ruffian struck savagely at his head with a "life-preserver."

He had barely time to guard with his right arm. The life-preserver whipped sharply round the taut muscle of his arm, the recoil jerked the weapon from the owner's hand, and it flew with a whiz into the darkness.

Miles's right hand caught the rowdy under the left ear, and he went down with a hoarse grunt like a felled ox. His comrade had barely time to loose his hold on his victim, when a trip and a swing sent him headlong to the ground on top of his comrade. Then Miles caught up the small man, who had half fallen, and with the sudden motion swung his feet clear of the ground. He was as light as a child.

"Excuse me, friend," the small man expostulated with a slight nasal drawl, "you will sling me over the house-tops. You have a grip like a 'grizzly.' Steady and easy; where is my umbrella? Now we're all right. Those blackguards—are they dead?"

He bent over them for a moment and felt the pulse in their thick wrists. "No, they're stunned. We'll send a policeman to look after them as we go by. They'll give him no trouble; you've taken all that off his hands. Are you coming this way? Nasty night, isn't it?"

Miles was so confounded at the small man's coolness that he hadn't a word to say in answer, but walked mechanically beside him down the lane into the open street.

The small man paused under the light of an electric lamp that made a dim white hole in the fog, and held Miles by the arm while he examined his face closely and keenly.

Miles returning his close stare saw a short, spare man, slightly deformed. One shoulder was a little higher than the other, and one leg a little shorter. He had a big head shaped like a pear, with a straggling grey "goatee" at the peaked end, and a shag of iron-grey hair with a slight wave in it at the rounded end. His nose was preposterously long; his mouth had a grim look, but there was a humorous little twist at the corners. His eyes were small but wonderfully bright and keen,

and his whole face was deeply and finely lined as with a sharp graving-tool.

He gave a short grunt of satisfaction when he had looked Miles all over from head to foot, and thrust his arm friendly fashion into his. Up to that he had only held on loosely to his coat-sleeve.

"You'll do," he said, with the same nasal twang in his voice. "I'm particular about the kind of man that does me a good turn; I hate to be under a compliment to a blackguard. But you'll do. My name is Adam Newman —what's yours?"

"Miles Bronder," said Miles, smiling. He thought the little man a little mad, if the truth must be told, yet there was a kindly shrewdness about the fine face that attracted him in spite of the odd manner.

"Miles! a very good name too, short and easy to remember. You must come home with me to-night, Miles. I owe you a good turn, and I pay my debts punctually."

"I don't mind if I do," said Miles. "I'm my own master."

His curiosity was excited; besides, he didn't like to leave the queer little man a second time alone in the streets.

"Your own master?" said the other shrewdly, "that means you are master of not much besides. Well, all the better for me if you want a helping hand, and I can give it, I expect."

They were walking briskly down New Oxford Street. Miles was amazed at the lightness and length of the old man's stride. He was hard set to keep pace with him.

At the corner he met a policeman and sent him off to bag the brace of jail-birds. Then he turned brisker and lighter than ever down Tottenham Court Road. Miles panted along beside him.

Near the end of the road he stopped and fitted a latch-key to a narrow door beside a broad shop window, with the name, "Woltoger, Prim and Co., Electrical Appliances," over it.

The passage was suddenly flooded with pure white light as Mr. Newman entered, and he went lightly up the stairs four at a time in front of Miles, who followed more slowly.

When they reached the landing the light in the passage went out.

Mr. Newman flung open a door on the landing and pushed Miles in before him into a large warm room, bright as day with electric light.

The partition between back and front drawing-room had been removed, and the whole first floor was given over to this singular room. It struck Miles at once as familiar, and in a moment later he recognized the reason in the resemblance to Stephen Curson's laboratory at Oakdale. There were the same ranges of scientific appliances of all kinds, the same long shelves of books and bottles. But what took him most at the first

glance was the singular neatness of the place. Notwithstanding its vast size, the room was as full and as neatly packed as a ship's cabin. It was plainly a living-room as well as a laboratory.

Adam Newman gave him the notion of an old-fashioned magician as he flitted lightly and noiselessly about in preparation for supper, and Miles sat back in the easy-chair in which he had been planted and watched him. Electricity was the magician's familiar spirit. He played with science as a child with its toys. He touched one button, and an electric fire, with all the semblance and cheeriness of clean sea coal, blazed up in the grate. He touched another button, and a table laid for supper rolled noiselessly across the floor; a third, and a small electric cooking-stove was lit and ready for use.

He was plainly a cook as well as a scientist, and a scientist in his cooking. In twenty minutes a savoury hot supper smoked on the table, to which Miles did justice with all the vigorous appetite of healthy young manhood, aided and abetted by his host. The supper table slid away noiselessly to its allotted corner, and a bowl of mulled wine, delicately spiced, followed in due course, and dissipated the last vestige of the chill which the night mist had engendered, making their blood tingle with a genial glow.

Then the host produced a box of wonderful Havana cigars, and the two men lay back in their chairs and

puffed blue smoke for five minutes in the very extremity of physical contentment.

Mr. Newman broke the silence suddenly. "Now tell me all about yourself," he said: "who are you; where do you come from; what you're doing; what you mean to do; everything?" He asked the comprehensive question as if it were the most natural thing in the world. There was no bashfulness about Mr. Newman. The slight nasal twang in his voice explained everything.

For a moment Miles resented his blunt curiosity with the shy reserve of the young, who love to bury their thoughts and feelings out of sight and hearing. But the bright eyes that were fixed attentively on his face were kindly as well as shrewd. It was plainly so much a matter of course to Mr. Newman that he should be told, that instinctively Miles began to tell him.

The little man listened to the story in dead silence, offering no comment, till Miles wound up with a description of his brief tussle with Steven Curson in the hall, and his departure from his father's house.

"This Steven Curson—as you call him," Newman interrupted, "what was he like, this wonderful scientist, —tall, gaunt, and strong?"

"Well, yes," Miles answered modestly, startled at the truthful description, but remembering the result of the encounter, "tall and gaunt, and tolerably strong."

"And very dark?" Newman continued almost excitedly, "black hair and eyes?"

"No," Miles answered promptly, "his skin is dark, right enough, and his hair is black, but his eyes are a queer shade of blue."

"That settles it," said Mr. Newman with apparent inconsistency, "the very man—but we'll talk of that another time. Go on with your story."

"There's really little more to tell," said Miles. "I pitched up the university and came to London a fortnight ago, with a few pounds in my pocket. I suppose I have more muscle than brains. Anyhow, my muscle was more use to me. After trying for a score of things, I had to settle down at last as a dock-labourer. I think I may fairly say I distinguished myself as a dock-labourer, for I could get a shilling an hour when the other chaps only got sixpence. Naturally the other chaps didn't like it. Some of them expressed their views on the subject a little roughly, but I managed to convince them they were quite wrong—still, it made things unpleasant, and I began to think of throwing the whole job up. Well, as I was going home to my den this evening—or last evening I should say, I happened to drop into one of the east side music-halls—half music-hall, you know, half pub."

He stopped abruptly.

"Well?" asked Mr. Newman.

"You must think I want to brag. You know you asked for the whole story. Besides, it isn't really anything to brag about."

"Oh ! go on, go on ; you are not one of the bragging sort. I can see that much for myself."

"Well, there was drinking going on and the whole air was misty with tobacco smoke. So I had my pipe and mug like the rest. I was right up at the back of the place, and I could just see through the smoke-cloud the stage at the far end, where a nice-looking little girl was singing a nasty little song. I don't care much for that sort of thing myself," Miles went on, blushing furiously at the confession of his own modesty, "and I finished off my pint and made ready to start out, when there was a great cheering and stamping of feet, and the little girl went off and a chap they called Hercules came on the stage. He was dressed in what was supposed to be a lion's skin, but it must have been a very small and mangy lion that used it. Anyhow it was no more than a dirty yellow patch on the shoulders of the strong man. He was a big chap, right enough, but I could see at a glance that his muscle was half padding. Well, he had the usual bag of tricks on show. You've seen some of those chaps ?"

Newman nodded.

"He lifted the dumb-bells and he broke the chains, and tore the pack of cards right across, and he carried the piano—that was made like a matchbox—across the stage. Then he wound up by challenging any man in the room to a trial of strength for fifty pounds. I suppose I was in a nasty humour after the row at

the docks, so I shouted out 'Here,' and began pushing my way up through the hall on to the stage.

"Every face in the place was turned towards me, all staring big and red through the smoke, shouting and cheering and laughing. I felt ashamed of myself the moment I spoke. But there was no turning back then, so I went on, the crowd squeezing together to make room. I could see they expected some fun when the strong man got hold of me. But the strong man himself didn't like it a little bit. There was a savage scowl on his face as he saw me coming. Plainly he had some 'pals' in the crowd, for I was twice kicked in the shins as I passed, and once tripped and almost flung on my face on the floor.

"I was in a savage humour, I can tell you, when I got on the platform at last. The strong man tried to bull-doze me at first.

"'Where's the young chicken,' he cried, 'as wants his neck wrung ?' The crowd shouted with delight at the prospect of sport, when he made a kind of playful grab at my throat.

"I gripped his hand and held it, and gave his arm a little twist to show I would stand no nonsense. It was not much of a twist, but it was enough to show him I could have broken his arm if I wanted to. 'Easy, mate,' he whispered, under cover of the shouting, 'don't you give the show away, and I'll let you stand in.'

"But my temper was roused, and it's nasty when it's roused.

"'Come on,' I said loudly, so that the crowd might hear. 'Let's see who's the best man.'

"Before he could stop me I laid hold of the big dumb-bells. They were cork, as I suspected, so I just caught hold and tossed them right out amongst the audience. You should see their frightened faces as the big things fell. But of course no one was hurt. The crowd smashed the wooden bars, and tossed the big cork balls backwards and forwards, shouting with laughter. The chains which he broke were held together with thin wire, the pack of cards had been already torn in the middle and patched together with tissue-paper.

"As I tossed the doctored pack out into the hall the strong man made a rush at me. I ducked and gripped him by the leather belt, swinging him clear off his feet, and held him up like a sprawling dumb-bell. The place roared with delight when I stopped and laid him flat on his back on the stage.

"But the row had only begun. I was right in thinking he had pals in the hall. Three hulking chaps climbed over the footlights on to the stage, and for ten minutes we had a fine free fight. The chaps were half drunk ; they hadn't a notion how to box—well, somebody got hurt, and it wasn't I. In ten minutes the fight was over. The proprietor himself came on

the stage. The strong man and his friends had enough of it. They were bundled out through a back door, for it would not be safe to let them through the audience.

"I was a bit ashamed of myself, I can tell you, when I cooled down. The crowd cheered like mad, and wanted me to go on with the performance, but I was in no humour for any more of it.

"As I stepped down and out they all offered me drink and wanted to shake hands. Just outside the door the proprietor collared me again, and brought me off to a private snuggeries and offered me five pounds a week for half-an-hour's 'turn' every night. 'On the square, mind you,' he said cautiously, 'no fakes this time. I don't want no more knock-outs.' I asked a day to think it over. I meant to close with his offer. It was better than dock labour, anyhow. Though my conscience was not quite easy about the way I treated the poor devil of a strong man, I was still in a nasty humour when I heard your cry for help, and—well, you know my whole history up to date. Now——"

"Now it's time to go to bed," said Mr. Newman, quietly interposing; "we'll finish our talk to-morrow morning at breakfast."

Miles found an airy, warm and comfortable room waiting for him as for an expected guest, with electric lamps and fire lighted.

"You may sleep till nine o'clock to-morrow," were Mr. Newman's last words as he left him.

CHAPTER VIII

THE MAGIC GIFT

AT nine o'clock next morning Miles was still fast asleep, dreaming that he was a prince in fairyland and had rescued Una from a fiery dragon, and they had both stepped into a flying chariot and were going smoothly up—up—

He woke with a start. The bed was rising smoothly and noiselessly carrying him with it. Before he could gather his scattered senses, he was sitting on the soft carpet and the bed sank softly back in its place. At the same time the shutters of the room flew silently open, and an electric stove lit under a water-can in a corner near the washhand-stand.

Twenty minutes later Miles found his host and his breakfast waiting for him in the great laboratory and living-room down-stairs.

"Now," said Mr. Newman, when the breakfast was over and the cigars lit, "you want to know something about me, naturally enough. Well, I'm what was

called a magician in the old times, and a scientist in the present day."

"I guessed as much," said Miles, with a glance round the laboratory; "see eggs—well, you know the proverb."

"Did you guess I was the greatest scientist of the age?" said Mr. Newman modestly, "for I am."

"Indeed!" was all that Miles could get out in his amazement.

"Well, I honestly think I am," Mr. Newman went on complacently, but with a twinkle in his keen grey eyes. "My best pupil, my chief rival, is a friend of yours."

"Of mine?"

"Why, certainly—Steven Curson, otherwise Kinard Murdock. I knew him from your description. We worked together once upon a time in the States."

"But you said your man had black eyes," said Miles, suddenly remembering, "and Curson's are blue."

"That's one of the tricks I taught him. That's what makes me so certain. Kinard Murdock, or Steven Curson, whichever you please to call him, you may take my word for it, is a very great scientist and a very bad boy. I know some pretty bad things about him myself, and I guess others from what you told me."

"I never liked the man!" cried Miles bluntly.

"I suspect you never had any reason to," Newman said. "But the other you told me of—Thornton?"

"Thorncroft."

"Yes, Thorncroft. Isn't it a little suspicious to find him in such company?"

"Oh! I'd answer with my life that he is all right. He's my uncle by marriage, and my father was always his best friend, and trusted him in everything. He seems a prim, dry-as-dust lawyer, but he has a good heart and he's as straight as his own office ruler."

"Then my friend Kinard Murdock—your friend Steven Curson—is at the bottom of this roguery, if there has been any roguery in the business."

"There has been," said Miles hotly. "I found him and that dandified young whelp, Cyril Thorncroft, conspiring together."

"Well, then, we'll get to the bottom of the conspiracy you bet."

"When? how?" Miles asked eagerly. Already he was inspired with an almost insane confidence in this queer, crooked little old man.

"Quietly! quietly! We must wait and watch and take the conspirators off their guard. They will be most cautious just at the start. Caution is a thing that wears off by use."

"But meantime?" queried Miles.

"Meantime I have something else to say to you and do for you. You saved my life last night, my boy. You saved the greatest scientist of the age from a couple of brutes made like men, to whom the world and its mysteries has no more meaning than a convenient

place in which to eat, drink, rob and kill. It would be a grotesque anomaly if animals of that kind killed me. Yes, you saved a great scientist last night, Miles. But you also saved the little weak, deformed creature Adam Newman, who is very fond of life and its wonders. The little man is very grateful, and the greatest scientist hopes to help him to prove it. You'll let me—won't you?"

The whole manner of the man changed. There was something almost fatherly in his voice, something that recalled to Miles the memory of his own father in the protecting way the small, thin, wrinkled hand patted the big shoulder.

There were tears in the young fellow's eyes as he blurted out—"It was nothing I did for you, sir, I just happened to be there, so I——"

"So you saved my life. Now I am foolish enough to think that of some little importance. You must not go away from me to be a strong man in a low music-hall."

"I'm good for nothing else," said Miles despondently.

"Tell me," said Mr. Newman, with startling irrelevance, "did you ever read fairy tales?"

"Well, yes, sir, as a kid of course," stammered the astonished Miles. He thought the old gentleman had gone suddenly mad.

But Mr. Newman was to all appearance quiet and shrewd as ever.

"Well, I'm going to offer you a part in a fairy tale," was his next astounding statement. "You know the story is in all the collections of the good little girl that helps the ugly but good-natured fairy and gets a fairy gift for reward?"

Miles nodded vaguely, too astounded to speak.

"Well, if you be the good little girl, I'll be the ugly old fairy, and I'll give you a fairy gift worth having."

"I don't really quite understand you, sir," said Miles, with an anxious eye on the queer little old man.

"Would you like to be the greatest athlete the world ever saw?" Mr. Newman asked, with another abrupt change of subject. "Because," he went on without waiting for a reply, "I—the greatest scientist—can make you the greatest athlete if you choose."

The man's manner was so quiet and self-assured that belief began to struggle vaguely with amazement in Miles's mind.

"I should like it of all things," he said politely, "but it's impossible, of course."

"Not at all! not at all!" said Mr. Newman; "first let me introduce you to an athlete of my training."

He whistled and called "Puck, Puck," and a stoutly-built Irish terrier leaped up from a small dog-kennel in a corner, and came gambolling across the carpet. .

"I don't see any points in that dog more than any other dog," said Miles, unconsciously quoting from "The Stranger," in Mark Twain's famous story.

The little American's eyes twinkled. "Indeed! well, that's my famous jumping dog."

He put a stick into Miles's hand. "Hold it out," he said. "Oh! higher, higher, higher—as high as you can hold it. There! that will do; that's a good six feet, I should think. Now, Puck, over!"

The stoutly-built terrier looked up in his master's face, backed away from Miles, took half-a-dozen yards of a swift run, then he seemed to soar rather than leap into the air, floated over the stick, and dropped on the carpet as light as a thistledown.

Mr. Newman took the stick from Miles's passive hands.

"Pick him up," he said, pointing to the terrier that was fawning and wagging his tail like any other commonplace, ordinary dog.

Miles picked him up by the scruff of the neck, and dropped him with a cry of amazement.

The stoutly-built terrier felt as light in his hand as an eider-down cushion, and fell as softly.

Mr. Newman's eyes positively sparkled.

"That's it!" he cried, "that's it! I can make you like that if you choose."

"Like a dog!" said the bewildered Miles, with vague remembrance of the genii and the transformation of the Arabian Nights running through his mind.

Mr. Newman laughed. "Oh! no, no. I mean I can make you as light in proportion as Puck. Go to bed,

Puck ! I can make you leap like Puck, I can make you run ; can make you swim like Puck, and do a hundred things that Puck cannot do. I can make you, in one word, the greatest athlete the world has ever seen, and at the same time I can demonstrate to the world the greatest scientific discovery of the age. It's very simple. Do you know anything about chemistry ? "

" Very little."

" And physiology ? "

" Nothing at all."

" Never mind. You will understand well enough."

He went to a glass case at one end of the room and drew aside a red curtain that hung on brass rods in front of it.

Miles saw that the case was filled with skeletons and loose bones of various animals, all neatly arranged and labelled. But Miles noticed that the bones and skeletons of the same species apparently were quite different in colour and appearance. Some were blood-red, some were dark-green, but the majority had the bright metallic gleam of polished steel or silver.

Mr. Newman opened the case and put one of those glistening bones in Miles's hands. It was as light as cork, as hard and strong as steel.

" That will do for the present. Now sit down ; light another cigar and let us talk. There's no hurry. You know what specific gravity means, of course ? " He spoke like a school-master to a small boy.

"I think I do," said Miles hesitatingly; "it's the weight of anything in proportion to its size."

"Precisely. We generally judge it by the standard of water—that is by comparison with the same bulk of water. Your body is about the same weight. Lead is many times the specific gravity of water. You are many times the specific gravity of air, and hydrogen many times less. Do you follow me?"

"I think I do."

"Well, Puck is about half the specific gravity of an ordinary dog, and the bone you have just handled is half the specific gravity of an ordinary bone. But neither Puck nor the bone has lost any of their strength or toughness."

"I begin to have a notion of what you are driving at. But how—"

"I was just coming to that. Now we will have to go a little way into physiology—a very little way will do. Have you ever heard that in a certain time the whole human body changes its substance, like a coat that is patched and patched till not an atom of the old cloth is left?"

"I've heard it, but I didn't quite believe it."

"Well, you may believe it. We needn't consider the time the transformation usually takes place, for science can shorten or lengthen that time, and I claim to have made the record. But you will at once understand that the new body is made up of food and drink, and

its composition and its strength—and to some extent, at least, its specific gravity—will be influenced by the substance of our food and drink."

"I'm beginning to see light," said Miles eagerly.

"It's very simple," Mr. Newman modestly replied; "all really great inventions are very simple. The idea was first suggested to me by that common experiment of colouring an animal's bones red by feeding it on cochineal. If the colour can be changed, I said to myself, why not the substance? and if the substance of the bones, why not the muscles as well? I have experimented for twenty years with a vast variety of substances, some well known, some known only to myself. For example, into the bones I have introduced a large proportion of aluminium; into the muscles a considerable portion of india-rubber. I can only build, of course, within the frame of the body. But within that limit I can make muscle and bone stronger and lighter. Puck is the result of my process. I have tried it on myself, but not quite so successfully. I was too old when I began, and I'm not exactly the build for an athlete. Still I got my specific gravity down one-third, and I'm the most active man of my age in the world."

"I can believe all that," Miles murmured, remembering the night before.

"There are few men of my age that could run or jump with the deformed cripple, but that's nothing to what you may become—young, strong, healthy, you are

the very man for my purpose. I can undertake in less than six months to reduce your specific gravity by one-half. Remember what that means. Your bulk and strength will remain the same; indeed, I believe your strength will be increased, but you will have only half the weight to carry when you run or walk, only half the weight to lift when you leap or climb. You will run at least twice as fast; you will leap at least twice as high as ever man leaped before. You will be like a cork in the water; you will be lighter than the birds in the air. I will then have only to make you a serviceable pair of wings, and the problem that has puzzled mankind since the creation will be solved, and the greatest invention of all time complete."

The little old man was in a kind of frenzy of excitement. His eyes sparkled, his small body trembled, his very hair seemed to vibrate as with a powerful electric current. The American nasal twang was stronger than ever in his voice.

Miles caught the glow of his enthusiasm. His reply was not precisely eloquent, but it was to the point.

"I'm on," he said.

"You will want much patience."

"I will have it."

• "You will suffer much pain."

"I can bear it."

"Right then," said Mr. Newman, as they clasped hands, "it's a bargain, and to-morrow we begin."

CHAPTER IX

A PRODIGY

"I'm afraid it's no go, sir," said Cyril Thorncroft, tossing a letter across to his father as they sat alone at breakfast six months later; "you must try yourself."

Mr. Thorncroft read the letter with tightened lips and gathering frown, while Cyril helped himself to a devilled bone and babbled on gaily.

"You see, sir, Daisy is—well, she *is* a daisy and no mistake. I managed the thing as nicely as could be. Did a case with another girl, got her riled, let her flare up, held my tongue until she gave herself away. 'But I'll divorce you,' she wound up. 'It will be a good riddance of bad rubbish.'

"Then I saw my chance, and chipped in quietly. 'All right, my dear,' I said, 'that will just suit yours truly, and I told her the whole story right off the reel.'

"You did!" cried his father aghast. "Didn't I beg you not to tell her a word of it?"

"Of course you did. But what was I to do? Yesterday I didn't want a divorce, and to-day I did. Daisy

is no fool. I should give some reason for the change, and at the moment I could think of nothing but the true one."

For a moment the father was tempted to anger—the clever man's intelligent anger—against the fool, but one look at his son, so handsome, so *débonnaire*, so bright-looking, so like his beautiful dead mother, changed his anger to that unreasoning, absorbing affection which was the governing motive of his life.

"You shouldn't have told her, Cyril," he said gently. "I had my own strong motive when I begged you not."

"I suppose so, dad," Cyril answered carelessly, "and I suppose you were quite right. But there's no help for spilt milk."

"Well! well! that's true enough. What did she do when she heard it? Flared up worse than ever?"

"Not a bit of it. She cooled down to freezing-point in a minute. 'So there is another girl—is there,' she said, 'with lots of tin, and she's as jolly as they make them, is she? and you're mashed on her all to nothing,'—she spit my own words back at me between her teeth—'and you're tired of Daisy Mordaunt and would like to throw her aside like a soiled glove. No you don't, Master Cyril, no you don't. I'd see you d——d before I'd divorce you.'

"'Steady there, old girl,' I said, 'two can play at that game. You have kicked over the traces yourself,

Mrs. Thorncroft, as well as your hubby, as I can prove, if I'm put to it.'

"The next moment I was sorry I spoke. There was a look in her eyes that I've seen in the lioness in the 'Zoo,' when she's walking up and down in front of the bars, thinking how she'd like to get out at you, only Daisy's eyes were more devilish. She drew in her breath sharp with a kind of hiss.

"'Ah! you would, would you!' she whispered; 'well, you'd better not, Cyril Thorncroft. For your own sake, and for the girl's sake, you'd better not.'

"Well, after that I thought I'd better let her cool on it. So I took my hat and sloped for the country, and I neither saw nor heard from her for a month until I got that letter this morning."

Mr. Thorncroft read the letter again for the third time.

"Dearest Curley," it ran.

"She always calls me 'Curley,'" Cyril explained, "when she's in a coming-on humour."

"DEAREST CURLEY,

"It won't do, it really won't. I cannot part with you, so there. Let the other girl and her money go hang, for I know it was only her money you are after. I can earn enough for two, and I'll do the earning if you'll do the spending. I've been a nasty naughty girl, but I didn't mean it, and I'll be good any more, as

the children say. Forgive and forget, old boy; I never cared for any one but you. Come back by the next train, and all will be forgiven.

“Your own little wifey-pifey,
“DAISY THORNCROFT.”

“She may be coming round all right, sir,” commented Cyril cautiously, with a side-look at his father; “that’s the kind of spooney letter she writes when she’s in good humour.”

But Mr. Thorncroft was deep in thought, and did not seem to hear him.

“Do you mean to go and see her?” he asked abruptly at last.

Cyril hesitated.

“I don’t know,” he said nervously. “Perhaps it would be better to give her a little more time. She can scratch as well as purr, if she’s put to it; or perhaps——” He hesitated for a word.

“Well?” said Mr. Thorncroft.

“I was thinking perhaps that you might see her yourself, gov. Give her a little touch of the paternal, and all that kind of thing. You’d be sure to bring her round.”

“I doubt it,” said Mr. Thorncroft musingly, more to himself than to his son. “She’s not a woman easy to move, a woman of granite will and white-hot passion or I’m mistaken. Still it may be worth trying.”

Cyril heard or heeded only the last few words.

"Of course it's worth trying, gov," he said gaily; "nothing venture, nothing have; faint heart never won fair lady, and all that kind of thing. Go in and win! When do we start? To-morrow? I'm getting dead sick of this dull hole."

He glanced disparagingly through the broad bow-window over a scene lovely as anything broad England could show. The ground fell away from the house in wide wooded glades, glorious under a bright sun and a clear pale-blue sky in autumn's regal livery of purple and gold. There was the silver gleam of a lake far off away amongst the woods, and deer glanced here and there through the vista of the trees' clear outlines in the clear air.

But Cyril Thorncroft cared for none of these things. He missed the glare of lights, the hurry-scurry of the streets, "the sweet mud-honey of the town." It was a great relief to him that his father was about to take the Daisy negotiations off his hands, for he had a very real fear of that masterful young lady. The thought of her and the fear of meeting her had kept him out of London, and weighed heavily on his buoyant spirits, which now leaped up elastic from the strain.

"Of course, gov," he went on gaily, "we'll take Una with us when we toddle up to town. She's looking a bit chippy of late, off her grub, down on her luck, maid forlorn, and all that kind of thing. I own up it's my

fault. A girl naturally likes to be mashed. But what was a chap to do ? It's well to be off with the old love, *you* know the rest. But I'll be a good boy in future now that business is off my mind. I'll trot Una about a bit in London and cheer her up. By Jove ! I'll have her to see 'The Wonder of the World.'"

"The what ?" asked Mr. Thorncroft.

"Oh ! you know, the new athlete ; the record-maker, the tenth wonder of the world—that's what they call the chap, and I'm not surprised myself if half what they tell about him is true. He took London by storm a couple of weeks ago. He turned up at a championship meeting ; all the best men in the three kingdoms were there. First event, the champion high jumper jumped six feet four—a record. This chap, Martin Browne he calls himself, came out and jumped twelve feet first try, hopped straight up and down over the tape like an india-rubber ball. It was the same with the other events. The champion jumped twenty-four feet in the long jump ; our friend jumped forty. In the hundred yards race, in the mile race, in the seven miles walking match, he left them all nowhere. When the meeting was over there wasn't an unbroken record in the world except his own. Mr. Curson says that——"

"What's that ?" queried Mr. Thorncroft, whose mind had been busy with other things while Cyril was raving of the new athlete, but whose attention was caught instantly by the sound of Curson's name.

"Curson says he knows how it's done. He's up to the whole bag of tricks."

"What were you talking of just now—athletic sports, wasn't it? What does Curson know or care about athletic sports?"

"That's what gets me too; that's the puzzle of it."

"Of it? of what? Don't talk riddles, like a good fellow."

"Well, Curson doesn't care much for sport as a general thing—does he? Would sooner be messing about amongst his bottles and all that sort of rot, than back the winner at Epsom. But even Curson has gone daft on this new chap that I was telling you about; reads all they say in the papers about him, and they're always telling new wonders in the papers. One day it's cricket. He can catch a ball eight feet over his head, and runs from wicket to wicket in six strides. The next is swimming. He crossed the Channel and back without leaving the water—doesn't know how to sink they say. The next it's bicycling. He rode a twelve-pound machine of his own designing, geared to a hundred, and did his fifty miles an hour on the track. The next it's——"

"But what were you saying about Curson—what was Curson saying to you?" Mr. Thorncroft interposed, breaking in abruptly on this rigmarole.

"Oh! old Curson lets on to know the whole game; pretends it's science, not sport, don't you know. The

greatest scientific invention of the age, with a lot of big words to follow. It's a chap named Newcome or Newton he says is at the bottom of it. There was a chap named Newton, wasn't there, who was a great dab at that kind of thing in his day?"

"Was it Newman he said?" Mr. Thorncroft anxiously asked.

"That's the name! Heard old Curson speak of him?"

"Yes, yes, but Curson thought he was dead—died in America."

"Doesn't think it any more, but alive and kicking; going well and strong; says he created the other chap. Gad! he talks of him as if he were God Almighty, and has a good deal more respect for him. Sort of takes off his hat and goes down on his knees when he so much as mentions the name of Newman. He wants to see him, and he doesn't want to see him. My belief is Curson is a bit frightened of Newman."

Mr. Thorncroft made no answer.

CHAPTER X

A RECOGNITION

THREE days later they started for London—all four of them. Cyril was in exuberant spirits, which he inflicted on the impassive Una, who since Mr. Bronder's death and Miles's desertion had grown pale and listless, showing no like or dislike for any one or anything; living and moving as if in a trance, and yielding her will to those about her with a gentleness that was in pitiable contrast with the bright wayward little beauty of a year ago.

Cyril Thorncroft thought her wonderfully improved by the change. "Used to laugh and jest at a fellow," he said to his father, "you never knew what she'd be at next. Now she just sits still and listens, and looks pleased when a fellow talks to her."

So "the fellow" was kind enough to talk to her incessantly all the way to London. The "Tenth Wonder of the World" still filled what, by courtesy, may be called his mind, and his talk ran on a great performance to which he was to take Una next day.

"He has beaten everybody at everything except football," he said. "To-morrow will be his first appearance on the football field. A first-class fifteen plays a third-class with 'The Wonder' thrown in. They've hired the biggest ground outside London, but it won't be half big enough for the crowd, though they've trebled the prices. I've got tickets for the stand, and I had to pay a pretty penny for them, I can tell you. They say the chap gets what money he likes, and I'm not surprised if he's just one-half what they say he is."

So Cyril prattled inanely, and Una listened with a faint smile, and all the time thought what a dreary, hopeless place the world was, and wished herself dead.

They settled down comfortably at the Hôtel Métropole, and Cyril fussed about making arrangements for the morrow, as though the football match were a matter of international importance.

A carriage and pair from the hotel took them to the grounds. Una, pale and listless, merely submitted without protest. But Curson, the scientific recluse, showed a curious eagerness. On the other hand Mr. Thorncroft declined. He had his work, he said, cut out for him elsewhere, and Cyril bade him a careless "good-bye" at parting, as if that work were no possible concern of his.

Not without reason had Cyril boasted of his provision and precautions. The road leading to the

football ground was crowded; the ground itself was packed. But they found their reserved seats vacant, just behind the goal-post nearest the gate—almost the best seats on the ground. Cyril was so elated that he even took credit to himself for the mild beauty of the day.

The teams, at the time, were stalking over the ground in gay jerseys and white trousers, cut short at the knee, showing the strong bulging calves.

Cyril questioned a man next him with a field-glass to his eyes.

"That's him!" the man said in a tone of suppressed excitement; "no! there to the right; the big chap with the short curls and the fair face like a girl's. There! don't you see him standing by himself? I thought all London knew 'The Wonder.'"

"I have only come up to London last night," Cyril explained apologetically, as he adjusted the field-glasses.

Curson took the glass from Cyril and examined the young athlete through the powerful glasses, closely, eagerly, all day letting no motion of his escape; from first to last, Una sat listless as a statue, and her glasses lay idle in her lap.

A scratch team that modestly dubbed themselves "The Nobodies," captained by "The Wonder," played the International, whose captain—Stanley Bolton—was declared to be the greatest Rugby forward England had ever seen.

Sharp at the appointed time Stanley Bolton kicked off—a model kick, sharp, strong and low, with a propellary like a modern cannon. Instantly all the field was alive with the rush of men.

Bolton led the forwards with a dash; “The Wonder” lay behind modestly at half-back.

The ball was caught, returned, and kicked out of bounds. It was tossed back between the opposing lines, scrummaged for, wrestled for, tussled, rescued, returned, and again kicked out of bounds.

So the play progressed for a while monotonously enough. The captains, at first, took little part, watching each other. After a while “The Nobodies” began to slacken in their work, and were outplayed by their trained opponents at every turn. But their captain woke up as they slackened and played for them all. Twice the Internationals were on the brink of a try. Twice he rescued the ball and sent it back with a long, low drop kick into the opposing lines.

Stanley Bolton was in the heart of every scrummage, forcing the ball through by sheer weight and strength. But his rival circled rapidly as a whirling leaf round the mass of men that whirled and struggled with legs and arms close interlocked like a monster centipede.

Again and again he picked the ball up and ran or passed, as occasion offered, and saved the situation.

Half-time approached and still no goal. Stanley Bolton played with furious activity and force, rushing

down the ground and scattering the opposing charges as the steamer scatters the foam with irresistible momentum. The other wheeled and dodged and leaped and ran with a speed and agility that seemed miraculous. He neither charged nor met a charge. Twice only in the long day did he and Stanley Bolton encounter, and he rebounded from that fierce onset like a tennis ball from the racket, but each time he carried the ball with him in his rebound.

Bolton has got possession once again, and comes rushing like a locomotive with full steam up, straight on for the opponents' ground.

Two of "The Nobodies" charged him in full career, and went over like a couple of ninepins.

Only the rival captain is between him and the goal-line.

Bolton set his teeth, gripped the ball hard, and went for him.

There is a roar of anger from the crowd, for "The Wonder" leaps aside, shirking the shock, and Stanley Bolton goes straight on for the goal, while the other follows like the wind. Not twenty yards to run—pursuit is hopeless.

But the angry roar changes in a second to a wild burst of applause. Bolton's foot is already on the line when the man behind, a dozen yards away, leaps sudden and swift as a pouncing hawk, and clutches him by the uplifted heel. He pitches forward on his head and lies

where he falls, while the ball rolls harmlessly from his slack hands.

"Half-time" is called at the moment. No score yet.

The second half's play is finer than the first. Bolton seems to have got new strength by his tumble, and plays with marvellous dash and courage, but over and over again his rival foils him in what looks an inevitable goal, with such apparent ease that the notion gets abroad amongst the crowd that he is playing at play. The second half draws to a close, and still no score. At last "The Wonder" has snapped the ball from the heels of the struggling skirmishers, and is away with it like a flash of light straight up the ground. But the scrummage had been close to his own goal-line. He has the whole ground to cover bristling with vigilant opponents. He has dodged two desperate rushes. He nears the opponents' goal when three determined foes, with Stanley the resistless in the centre, come charging down on him.

There is no shirking this time. He never slackens his speed ; he never swerves from his straight course. In a second they will meet him. Their muscles are already straining for the shock, their hands are already stretched to clutch, when suddenly he rises from the ground like a ball on the bound, and flies over their heads. A second leap and he has cleared the goal-keeper, and planted the ball straight behind the goal, while the whole

ground roars with applause like the din of a great battle.

It chanced that Una, behind the goal, looked as he leaped, and knew him at a glance. The girl's pale face flushed, the bright eyes sparkled, her passive listlessness kindled to wild excitement, she called to him.

Amid the loud thunder of applause and the wild clanging of the bell that told the game was over—won by a try—he heard the cry, "Miles! Miles," in that familiar voice. He looked and saw the face he loved, lit up with love and welcome.

The same glance showed him close beside the evil face of Curson, and the oft-repeated caution of his friend and master, Newman, came quickly to his mind.

Miles, at the moment, felt that at any cost he must see and speak to her again. He eluded the clamorous rush of his team, who would have chaired him round the ground, and fled like a streak of lightning for the dressing-tent.

There he flung off his football toggery, splashed in cold water, jumped into a tweed suit, and was back across the ground at a speed no other man in the world could rival.

But short as was the time, Una and her party had already vanished from the stand.

He rushed to the entrance. In the road outside there was a well-appointed carriage and two horses,

and at the moment, as it chanced, Curson was in the very act of helping Una to her seat. Twice she looked back wistfully, and twice he made frantic efforts to catch her eye. But the crowd was dense round the gate, and her gaze was away across the grounds.

He saw Cyril leap lightly into the carriage after Una, and saw them drive off, threading their way warily through the throng.

Then Miles made a frantic dash for the gate, but the crowd was close packed for yards in front of it, and trickled through as slowly as the sand through the neck of an hour-glass.

Before him was a man whom he knew—a strongly-built, square-shouldered fellow.

"Beg pardon, Warrington, old chap," he said, "but I'm in a desperate hurry."

Before the man could answer he laid his hands on his shoulders. His feet followed. He steadied himself for an instant, marked the direction of the receding carriage, then lightly as a cat on a garden-wall he stepped out from shoulder to shoulder over the closely-packed crowd. Some one saw him and knew him just as he was half-way across the human gangway, and raised a cheer.

Before the cheer had died away, he had leaped to the ground clear of the crowd and was off in a swift pursuit of the carriage. He gained upon it easily. But he knew he couldn't race the carriage all through

the streets of London without being captured as a lunatic.

A smart hansom was just in front and going fast. He shouted to the driver but could not make the man hear through the din of the traffic. He ran alongside. The trap was open and empty. He rose with a flying leap—a wonderful leap even for him—and he landed safely in the hansom. A sharp rap on the roof brought the amazed face of the bewildered driver to the trap-door. Miles gave him no time for astonishment.

"You see that carriage in front?" he said.

"Yes, sir."

"Keep it in sight, not too close. Here is a sovereign to begin with. I'll give you another when you earn it."

"Yes, sir."

The trap-door closed with a bang, and the hansom followed the carriage through crowded streets and round sharp corners as unerringly as a hound a hare.

The carriage stopped at the Hôtel Métropole. The hansom stopped at the corner of Northumberland Avenue opposite the Grand. Miles leaped out and tossed the promised sovereign to the driver.

A few minutes later he walked down the street and strolled carelessly into the hall of the Métropole.

He could not tell what were his hopes or intentions, except to get as near as possible to Una. But fortune favoured him. To the right amongst the luggage there was standing a lady's bicycle. The ivory handles

and the neat spring forks seemed familiar. A closer glance at a small gold plate on the handle-bar, with Una's name on it, made suspicion certainty.

Then came to him at once the remembrance of Una's love of a cycle ride in the early morning, and a sharp sting of jealousy at the thought that the foppish Cyril was her companion now.

At the same moment a respectful voice sounded in his ear.

"Beg pardon, sir, can I do anything for you, sir?"

It was the big, bearded, uniformed porter of the hotel. Himself a retired athlete, he knew and worshipped "The Wonder" at a distance, and had hovered round him in the hope of the honour of a word; when he could stand the strain no longer, he spoke.

"Oh, no, thank you very much indeed," Miles answered, with eyes still on the bicycle.

"Nice bicycle that, sir," the porter ventured, catching the direction of his glance.

"Yes, but isn't it in danger of getting hurt standing there amongst the baggage?"

"No fear, sir," returned the gossiping porter. "I'll see to that. The lady as owns it wants it there so that she can get it in and out quietly when she likes. She was off for a long ride this morning before any one but myself was up in the house. Perhaps you know the lady, sir?"

Miles nodded. "Does she go out alone?" He couldn't keep his voice steady.

The porter gave him one swift, comprehensive glance, but made no other sign.

"Quite alone, sir."

"Every morning?"

"Cannot say that, sir. She has been here only one morning yet, so I can't say for certain, sir. But I think it is most likely, as she told me to leave her bicycle there ready. Oh! good-day, sir, and thank you very much indeed."

CHAPTER XI

LOVE GOES ON WHEELS

FROM the grey dawn next morning a young man, whose face and figure were blazoned on all the hoardings and dead walls of London, loitered on his bicycle quietly and unobserved round Trafalgar Square and up and down Northumberland Avenue.. Miles knew that Una's earliest hour in the country was six. But he would have stayed up all night rather than lose the slightest fraction of his chance of meeting her.

He had his reward. A faint rose tint suffused the pale-blue sky of the chill, clear autumn morning. A few lingering stars swam in the roseate haze and softly vanished as the sunlight grew.

Down the steps of the Hôtel Métropole and out into the solitary street a big, bearded porter carried a lady's bicycle.

• In a second she stepped into the saddle and was away, swift and noiseless as a shadow, past the National Liberal Club and out on the Thames Embankment, at this hour more deserted than a country road.

Miles felt his heart beat quick and wild as an imprisoned bird. His bicycle came down the slope so quickly that the front wheel almost caught a swarm of early pigeons in the street before they had time to rise and scatter with a flutter and a whirl of wings all round him. A strange fear took him that Una had vanished—that he would see her no more.

But as he curved out on the broad embankment she was the only living thing in sight, gliding past the obelisk that pointed clear-edged in the clear air at the clear sky.

Miles drew a deep breath of delight and slackened his speed. He had never thought London so beautiful as in this clear still morning. In front were the glittering pinnacles of the Houses of Parliament, beyond the great twin towers of Westminster, towering majestically through the smokeless air, and touched with the glory of the rising sun. The great city with towers and domes and steeples slept naked and beautiful in the pure air of the morning. The gay sparrows bustled and chirped in the gardens that hedge the Embankment, and the broad river whispered softly as it passed of the green country whence it came, of the deep ocean to which it flowed.

Miles's heart was tuned by love to beauty ; his eyes drank in the fair scenes eagerly with a vague delight. But all the earth's beauties and the sky's were but as bright accessories to the beauty of that slim figure that fitted so fast in front.

Still she fled, and he followed, ever at a distance and almost out of sight till she passed through the gate of Hyde Park and glided more slowly down a long solitary walk. Then he took heart of grace and made his bicycle fly till he came softly beside her.

"Good-morning, Una," he said quietly, and raised his hat.

"Oh!"

Her bicycle gave a sharp dart, like a frightened fish, across the path, and his hand touched hers for a second as he laid it on the handle-bar to steady the machine.

"You, Miles, you!"—the words came out in short gasps. There were tears in the bright eyes that turned to his, but joy shone through them. The sweet young face brightened as the sky brightens when the sun breaks from the skirt of a cloud.

"I saw you yesterday," she murmured, "and then you disappeared, and then— Oh! how did you find me here?"

"Never mind that now. I have found you; that's enough for me. Are you glad, Una?"

"Very; it's like old times."

They sped swiftly together along the smooth track where the dry fallen leaves rustled crisply under the flying wheels. The brisk air of the autumn morning blew freshly in their faces. The sad past was forgotten; the doubtful future ignored. They lived with a keen unreasoning joy in the delight of the present hour.

They were both so young. They were but vaguely conscious of the love that warmed their hearts with quick thrills of delight and made all the world so bright and beautiful. They asked no questions of their happiness. They were content to be happy—to be together again—to look in each other's faces, to listen to each other's voices. Their talk turned instinctively to the old times—the happy old times when they were boy and girl together. They made believe to be boy and girl still. There was no word of love; no word that bordered on love. But its rapture warmed their souls. For love is at its best when it is unconscious. Knowledge begets doubt, restlessness, fear and pain. But young love is content with a child's careless joy in life. When passion comes to the use of reason and is conscious of itself, its best days are passed.

One such hour of happiness was theirs; one hour whose pleasant memory would last their whole lives through. We have all of us such memories stored away in the inner sanctuary of our hearts; a smile; a word; a kiss; a moment of perfect happiness that hallows and lightens our after life. To all eyes but our own a worthless trifle; to us a priceless treasure; an essential portion of our being, which missing we could hardly know ourselves through eternity.

Such an hour had come and passed for Una and Miles in that first bright dawn of love—they two alone in the beautiful world.

The girl woke first with a start and a pang of regret, woke amid the hard facts of every-day life and remembered time.

They had made twice the complete circle of the Park and were back again at the gate at which they entered. The crowd and bustle told them the morning was already slipping on to day.

"Good-bye, Miles," she said, with no attempt to conceal her reluctance; "some other day, perhaps soon, again."

"No! no! no!" broke out Miles in eager protest. "Now, Una, now; the present alone is our own" (he borrowed that phrase from Adam Newman). "Let us at least have one whole long happy day together."

"But," she said, glancing at her watch—a pretty picture of perplexity—eager, yet coy, "it is long past my hour. They will think I have met with some accident."

"You can tell them you are all right—"

She pouted. "But I thought you wished that—I should—"

"By wire of course I mean." She brightened instantly. "There is a telegraph-office close by," Miles went on hastily, to give no time for a change of mind, and he took the lead without waiting for a reply.

"That do?" he said, when he had scribbled the message, "To Randal Thorncroft"—he wrote the Randal particularly plain—"Hôtel Métropole, London.

Have met an old friend, expect me late this evening.
Una."

"Would you only say 'met an old friend'?" Una asked, and looked him innocently in the face.

"Well, yes," he answered hastily, "unless perhaps—
No, I think that will do for the present."

"There!" said Miles, with a sigh of relief, "that's done all right," as he handed the money and message to the girl, who glanced archly at the lovers while she read it. Fortunately Una did not see the look.

"Now then, what about breakfast?"

The same thought had been in her own mind while he was writing, but she would have died rather than have owned it.

"I'm not in the least hungry," she said.

"Oh! you must have breakfast, you know. Come along!"

The elderly waiter in the big hotel three streets away was quite fatherly in his manner, and found them, without asking, a table for two in the quietest corner of the great empty be-gilt and be-mirrored dining-room.

"Breakfast, sir; yes, sir; what would you wish, madam?"

But Miles took the ordering to himself with splendid profusion, and coaxed Una to try this and to taste that, and encouraged her both by word and example, and she poured tea for him as in the old days, and fed daintily and heartily like a healthy, wholesome young woman as

she was. For they were in the stage when love helps the appetite, not hurts it. But somehow the spell was broken that had lifted them clean out of the every-day world, conscious only of each other's presence, and thrilled through and through with delight at that mere consciousness.

As they dawdled over the toast and marmalade, their thoughts and talk slipped back to the last sad parting.

There came a sudden silence, which Una broke abruptly. "Why didn't you come in time, Miles?" she cried, "oh! why didn't you come in time?"

"Why didn't you write, Una?" he asked in turn. "I would have come instantly if I had only known."

"But I did. I wrote three times, I wired twice. You never answered, and you never came."

"I got no letter and I got no wire," he said slowly. "There has been foul play, Una. I suspected it from the first."

"You don't suspect Mr. Thorncroft, Miles?"

"No, not Mr. Thorncroft. My father knew and trusted him. He is blunt and straight and honest, incapable of treachery."

"I'm sure of it. He was so kind and gentle—I didn't think it was in his nature to be so gentle, and he spoke so kindly of you, and was so sorry for you, I loved him for it. He was sorry too about that cruel will."

"The will was a forgery, Una. My father never wrote it; never signed it."

"Oh how I wish I could think that, Miles. But I was there, I saw him read it and I saw him sign it. Besides——" Her voice faltered, and she paused for a moment, her lips trembling.

"Besides what, Una? Go on."

"He spoke to me the day before about it. I did not know what he meant then, I thought—well, no matter what I thought. I promised solemnly that I would do what he wished me, and his wishes were plain when the will was read."

"He never meant it; I won't believe he ever meant it. I cannot believe it."

"But I know he did, Miles," she said gently. There was a frightened look in her face.

"You cannot know. Forgive me, Una, I could scarcely believe this unless my father came back from the grave to swear it to me."

"But if he did, Miles," she whispered, her voice trembling more and more, "if he—— Oh! I am tempted to tell you everything, but you will doubt me; you will laugh at me, and I cannot bear it."

"Tell me, Una," he entreated; "I will neither laugh nor doubt."

She paused again to get her voice under control, and spoke in an awe-struck whisper. It was plain at least that what she told was very real to her.

"Mr. Thorncroft came to me after you had gone without saying good-bye. Why did you go away, Miles,

without saying good-bye? Don't answer me now or I shall break down. Well, Mr. Thorncroft came to me about the will and wanted me to—to—but I would promise nothing, I could not believe it was all true. I was stunned, bewildered. Like you I felt that there was treachery somewhere. I did not trust my own senses or my own memory.

"He was most gentle and considerate, and spoke so kindly of you and your disappointment that my heart warmed to him. 'I will not press you for an answer now,' he said; 'you know what his wishes were, and mine and my son's.'"

"His son's!—that cad Cyril!"

"Don't, Miles. I cannot go on if you break out like that." She was quivering all over with excitement. "I am coming to the strange part of the story. I was lying awake in bed that night—wide awake. Oh! I know you will say I was asleep and dreaming. But I wasn't, I was wide, wide awake as I am now, staring into the darkness and thinking of you, when suddenly a strange white light filled the room. Where it came from I cannot tell. The wall opposite my bed melted away and I looked into the room where your father died. He was there in his bed alive, as I had last seen him before this hateful will was made, but very pale and feeble and worn almost to a ghost; and, Miles, as plainly as I see you now I saw the ghost of myself sitting at his bedside, myself out of myself, leaning

towards him. I heard him speak to me, and I heard myself answer as plainly as I now hear my own voice ; I heard again the solemn promise I gave him, not knowing what I promised. I knew its meaning then. I knew why the vision was sent to me. For as the words were spoken the whole scene vanished away and I lay alone in the black silence, faint with the wild throbbing of my heart."

CHAPTER XII

THE MAN AND THE MAID

THERE was a long pause. Una battled fiercely with the temptation, that was like physical pain, to find relief in passionate weeping.

Miles stretched out a big paw furtively, and touched and fondled the little hand that lay cold and limp by her side.

"Well," he said softly at last. There was nothing of the doubt she dreaded in his voice, only deep pity.

She took two or three short sips of tea; the cup clattered in the saucer as she put it down. Her hand swept with a swift gesture across her dry eyes as if she would brush away the memory of her terror, but her voice was steadier when she spoke again. She spoke no more of the vision of the night.

"When Mr. Thorncroft came next day," she began, "I had made up my mind at any cost to—— Oh! I cannot tell you, Miles, don't ask me! He did not let me say the words, thank God."

"I will take no promise from you now, Una," he

said at once, 'I have changed my mind since we met. I feel it would be unjust and cruel to press for an immediate answer. I only ask that you give yourself full time to think, and to do justice to my son's love and your dead father's hopes in your thoughts. There is a full year allowed by the will. Meanwhile I would only ask you to promise me that you will marry none other till that year's grace has passed, and I will be content.'"

"You did not promise, Una?" cried Miles eagerly.

"What else could I do? I was glad to get off so lightly. Besides, you had gone off without a word of—of—advice, I mean. How could I know whether—A year is not such a terribly long time,"

"It is a horribly long time," he said slowly. "But you won't think of that now. We won't remember anything except that we have one whole day to ourselves like the dear old times. Shall we go?"

"I'm ready." She shook the crumbs from her dress, and coaxed and patted a little vagrant curl into its place, smiling at the bright face that smiled back at her from the mirror.

"Where to?" he asked, when they were again gliding smoothly through the streets.

"Anywhere," she assented, "I'm quite content."

"Anywhere means nowhere. I have it—Richmond. A ride in the park, a picnic lunch on the grass, dinner at the hotel, and home in the moonlight. There will be a full moon to-night."

"By moonlight!" cried Una, "how wicked!" But she made no other objection to the scheme.

The luncheon-basket "with all appliances and means to boot" was promptly procured and strapped on Miles's handle-bar. Then on smooth-gliding tyres—the nearest the world has yet got to the wings of love—they flew to the wide solitude of the park.

Have we any right to follow? I think not. The old saw which says, "Two are company, three are none," is true even when that third is an invisible eavesdropper. Besides, there is nothing to be gained by spying on lovers. It is mere vanity and weariness of spirit. The unseen third is uncomfortable himself, and a cause of discomfort to others. He is not wanted there, and he does not want to be there. He watches a feast, fasting. The foolish, foolish words that are to them the quintessence of delight, for him are the irritating babble of idiocy. Viewed from the inside, love is the most divine delight that this wicked world holds—viewed from the outside it is a common and uninteresting form of lunacy.

Oh! it is the memory of the reader that helps out the bald details of the story-teller, that gives them life and meaning. If he can touch that thrilling chord of memory he is saved. If not he meanders on through meaningless trivialities and gets laughed at for his pains. For love is the light of all lives. The young girl who gazes on the fresh flowers of the bouquet for her first ball, dreams impatiently of love. The old woman who

weeps alone over the faded leaves that speak of dead hopes and joys, dreams sorrowfully of love. In man's innermost heart the memory of love hides itself from the sordid bustle and struggle of daily life. But when he is at his best, when he is alone with his own thoughts, then timid love takes life and form and power, and the memory of one fair face, of one gentle voice, is more to him than all the world beside.

Surely in the heart of you who read these pages—be you young or old—there is the memory or the hope of a long day alone with the loved one. To such hope or memory I would appeal to spare me the attempt and the inevitable failure to describe their happiness who are, even now, entering the broad gates of Richmond Park, where the woods are all resplendent in the gorgeous livery of the autumn, like bankrupt spend-thrifts whose brief day of glory is the forerunner of their ruin.

"Take my arm, Una," he said, as they swept up a long slope between the wide avenue of chestnuts, and the light touch of the little hand thrilled him with unreasoning rapture.

The morning had been brisk and chill, but it brightened and warmed into one of those glorious autumn days that tempt us to forget the summer is over and winter at hand.

They had their luncheon in a remote corner of the woods—a million miles away from the world, as far

removed as if they had been the sole inhabitants of Mars. Talking or silent the mere companionship was all-sufficing to them both.

Yet all the time they kept shyly aloof from love-making. Perhaps the absolute freedom, the very abundance of opportunity frightened them. They had been children together; boy and girl together. He had kissed her a hundred times; at first as a mere matter of course. But of late with a flutter of coy resistance that enhanced the sweetness of the salute. But not for worlds would he have kissed her now that they two were all alone in the woods. He dare not trust himself, so hot his passion. The brightness of her smiling eyes set his heart on fire. At most he ventured a timid pressure of the little hand that lay confidently on his arm, when at last they were clear of the lonely recesses of the wood and flying smoothly along the open roads of the park.

. Did she miss the customary salute? Did she guess the motives that restrained him? Did she in her secret heart applaud his self-restraint, or reprove it? Who shall say? Only once when they were alone together she chanced to come close to him and looked straight into his eyes and blushed all over at his gaze, and was shyer and more silent afterwards and not to be tempted from the public road again.

The sun was in a blaze of glory in the western sky when they came at last to Richmond hotel and the view down the shining river. A thousand boats moved

over the smooth and radiant water on to the great city, whose outlines softened by the distance and the golden haze of sunset were like a dream of fairyland.

Miles found a corner table in the great dining-room close to a window on the terrace. The moon was coming up—a huge globe of red fire—when, their dinner over, they strolled on the terraced walk amid the flower-beds and statues to the balcony that looked down on the river.

Something of pensiveness had come to them with the evening, and the moments together seemed the more precious as they were so soon to part. Slowly they moved backwards and forwards along the gravelled walk beside the river, with vague hopes and longings in their hearts that would find no outlet in words. Her hand rested lightly on his arm, and ever and again she stole a wistful glance at his face. Their bodies seemed in some subtle way to incline to each other as flowers to the sun: lovers unmistakable to all eyes that looked on them.

For a time they had the terrace and the river and the moonlight to themselves, the dining-room was crowded.

Then a woman, leaning on a man's arm, came softly down the sloping walk towards the river. She was still beautiful though past the first beauty of her youth. Her face was dark and thin, and her dark hair, parted smoothly over a broad smooth forehead, was

streaked with grey. The strongly-built, soldierly man on whose arm she leaned was probably her brother—certainly not her husband, for she still wore her widow's weeds. But sorrow had left no bitterness in her soul, and her eyes were full of motherly tenderness for the happy young lovers as they passed on the walk.

"Wonderfully pretty girl, Caroline," said the brother as they passed a second time.

"Hush! dear, they will hear you. Cannot you see it's a honeymoon? cannot you see how she takes possession of him with her eyes?"

To Una's ears—sensitive as the snail's horns—every word came distinct, and chilled her happiness with sudden fear and shame as the breath of frost chills the opening flower. The words were sharper for their very gentleness.

Her maiden modesty took sudden fright. She had paraded her love before the world, wooing him to woo. She shivered at the thought. Miles felt her shiver as the small hand slipped from his arm.

"You are cold, Una," he said anxiously, "there is a chill wind from the river. Shall we go inside?"

"No! no!" she cried hastily, with a sudden catch in her voice, "we must go back; it's getting late."

She was nervous, excited, impatient till they had started, but grew calmer when they were again on the road, gliding swiftly through the crowded streets in whose glare the pale pure moonlight was lost. Her

thoughts were a mystery, even to herself. She was filled with a confused tumult of joy that was almost pain, with a hope that was almost fear. She longed, yet feared, to be alone. They spoke little on the ride home. Miles was puzzled and pained. He had no insight to the mysteries of a young maid's heart just waking to conscious love. He felt himself outside in the cold world alone, and she misread his mood as he misread hers.

"Good-bye," she said suddenly. The pace had grown slow on their ride home ; they were just creeping into Trafalgar Square.

"Till to-morrow, Una ?"

"For a long time. I won't say for ever unless you wish me, Miles. But for a very long time. I should not have come with you. I feel now that I must try to keep my promise to the living and the dead. Good-bye ; I must go in alone."

Poor Miles was little used to woman's ways. Her voice sounded to him calm and cold. He could not see how she trembled. He could not know how near she was to breaking into sobs ; how one loving word from him would have changed her purpose and with it the whole current of their lives.

A sudden gust of anger took him at her coldness.

"Good-bye," he said as coldly, and let her go down alone the smooth slope of Northumberland Avenue, and saw her pass through the brilliantly-lighted door of the hotel.

Una went swiftly up the broad staircase without waiting for the lift. Her room was on the second floor, and she flung herself on the bed and found relief in the good cry which is the blessed privilege of women.

Miles rode home disconsolate, to seek comfort and counsel from Adam Newman.

"Keep away for a week," Newman advised.

For once he was wrong. A maid's moods are a mystery to the greatest scientist in the world. Love's instinct in Miles' heart that bade him call next day had been the wiser guide.

CHAPTER XIII

A SHE ANIMAL

MEANWHILE Mr. Thorncroft had not been idle. He made diligent inquiries about Miss Daisy Mordaunt, her love affairs and her finances before he ventured on a call at her semi-suburban retreat in St. John's Wood, the same morning that Una started on her bicycle ride alone.

It was an early visit, for in the morning he had learned was the best chance to find his son's wife unoccupied and alone.

A middle-aged woman in neat cap and apron ("Mrs. Respectability," Daisy always called her) opened the door for him.

"Can I see Miss Mordaunt?" he inquired.

The woman smirked at the question, and glanced at him out of the corner of a leering eye.

"Not exactly," she giggled, "she's in her——" But there was no answering smirk on his staid face, and the sentence ended tamely, "the mistress is engaged."

"Will you kindly take her my card?"—and there

was a glimpse of yellow with the white as the card changed hands.

"Certainly, sir ; thank you very much, sir. Will you kindly walk into the parlour ?"

"I will stand here in the hall, if you will allow me."

He saw the maid run up-stairs and heard her tap at a door on the drawing-room floor.

"Well ?" cried a voice—a shrill, impatient but not unmusical voice.

"A gentleman to see you, mam."

"Well, he cannot see me—not likely. Did you tell him I was engaged ?"

"He refused to go away. He says you'll see him ; he sent up his card."

"And paid you to take it up, of course. All right, shove it under the door, I cannot get out to open it."

The card had "Mr. Thorncroft" on it—nothing more.

There was a quick cry of surprise as Daisy Thorncroft read the name, and there was a new eagerness in the voice that cried out to the servant still standing demurely before the tightly-closed door.

"Oh ! you stupid ! why didn't you send him up at once ?"

"I thought perhaps—" began the bewildered servant.

"I thought you a fool always, and I was right. Curley !" the voice rang out loud and clear, "come up at once ! I'll be with you in a moment."

Mr. Thorncroft quietly appropriated the title to himself, and walked up at once.

The servant, still on the landing, pointed with a snigger to a door beyond that at which she stood, and Mr. Thorncroft walked unabashed into a lady's dressing-room, sumptuously furnished.

The walls were hung in rich rose-coloured paper that imitated stamped velvet. There were luxurious chairs and couches, and nude statues and pictures free in colour and design. At the far end a tall mirror stretched from floor to ceiling, and doubled the room.

Opposite the mirror there was a door slightly ajar, and through the door Mr. Thorncroft heard the splashing of water.

"Settle down, Curley," said the same clear voice he had heard before, "I'll be with you in a jiffy." And Mr. Thorncroft took his seat in a deep velvet chair, whose cushions sank under his weight, his back to the door, his face to the mirror.

He heard the door of the bath-room pushed open, and the mirror was suddenly filled with a vision of luxurious beauty.

A dainty down-padded dressing-gown of Japanese silk enveloped her body, tied loosely with a tasselled silk cord at the waist. Her small naked feet thrust hastily into slippers lined with swansdown showed a pure warm pink against the white fur. Her neck was bare, and the rich, red-gold damp curls, close clustering

as a water-dog's, fell about her shoulders and framed her face in gold. A wonderful face! the complexion brilliant, dazzling; the red lips half parted in an expectant smile, the tawny yellowish brown eyes aglow with a strange light. The contour of her body, lithe as a young leopard, showed through the clinging gown; not without reason was Daisy Mordaunt proclaimed by the connoisseurs the most graceful girl in all London.

Even Mr. Thorncroft's dull blood was stirred by this vision of warm loveliness.

The girl glanced hastily round the room. She uttered a sharp cry of surprise and fright as her eyes fell on the old man's face in the looking-glass. Then with an instinctive gesture she drew the silken cords of the padded dressing-gown closer.

Mr. Thorncroft faced round, and for ten seconds they looked steadily into each other's eyes as fencers do, with foils touching, before the first thrust and parry.

Her surprise and dismay rapidly gave place to anger. She was absolutely fearless—this young woman.

"Well?" she cried, standing before him defiantly, "why did you send up the wrong card—what do you want with me?"

"Pardon me," he said with staid courtesy, but without rising, "I sent up my own card. I am your husband's father, Mrs. Thorncroft."

"Oh crikey! the governor; so you knew?"

"For the last six months."

"That's the reason, is it? Oh! I might have guessed. The poor boy would never have thought of such a thing himself,—oh, to be sure, that's the reason. You sent him, of course."

The sentences came out in short disconnected jerks as the light broke on her in quick flashes. She dropped into a chair opposite him, now wholly unconscious of her dishabille.

"Well?" more defiantly than before, "you sent him to talk of a divorce?"

"I sent him, of course."

"Oh! I know that now; and he brought you my answer?"

"Yes, that is the reason I took the liberty of coming myself."

"You might have saved yourself the trouble if you come on the same errand."

"May I beg of you to listen to me for a moment or two?"

"Certainly, if it pleases you, it won't hurt me."

"You have heard from Cyril that I am anxious he should settle down in life?"

"He has settled—he's married."

Mr. Thorncroft glanced from her round the room. "H'm, married, yes, but hardly settled. My dear girl, come! be reasonable. You and Cyril have had a gay time together. Let him go; shake hands and say good-bye, and part friends."

"No!" The red lips tightened ominously.

"It need not perhaps be good-bye for ever," Mr. Thorncroft hinted.

"Not for a day. It cannot be done; you forget we're married."

"Yes, yes, but Cyril has not been quite a model husband. There is such a thing as a divorce—you have yourself hinted at such a thing in the course of your wedded life."

"Well! I never meant it. Cyril has kicked over the traces and riled me a bit now and again. I don't deny it, and I tried to frighten him as you'd try to frighten a naughty child with a bogey, but I never meant it. So long as I had first claim I never cared much. But I'll let no one inside of me. Oh! he has told me about that meek moll doodle of a country girl you mean to marry him to; not if I know it; never! never! So there—" with a sudden change of manner from defiance to entreaty, and the hazel eyes looked straight into his. "You're fond of him; I can see that; so am I, fonder than that other girl can ever be. I'll settle down and be good to him, and go straight and keep him straight—at least as straight as any one can. I'm not a bad sort if I'm taken the right way, and am not exactly a fright to look at."

She glanced at the mirror to confirm this modest verdict. The dressing-gown had fallen off a little from her neck—was it mere accident?—and from her left

shoulder, which showed rose-tinted marble against the dark silk.

"You are the loveliest woman I ever looked at," said Mr. Thorncroft, "except one."

"Oh! I know; his mother; she must have been a beauty. He has shown me her picture. You loved her; you love him because he's like her to look at. Well, you didn't love her a farthing's worth more than I love him. Don't ask me why? He's not clever, he's not over and above good. All the same he is the one man in the world for me."

"But for his own good?" Mr. Thorncroft interposed.

"His own good be blowed! I'm not that sort. I want him for myself."

"He would make you a generous allowance."

Her face hardened again, and an angry light kindled in her eyes.

"Drop it!" she snapped out sharply. "You are like your son; you think money means everything. I don't want money. I can earn more than I know what to do with. I have kept his pockets filled since we got married. All London is mad after me, and I want no man in it but one. I have him, and mean to keep him; so there!"

"Is that quite true?" Mr. Thorncroft asked dryly.

"Is what quite true?"

"About the other men."

"Before I was married?"

"And after you were married."

"It's a lie—a d——d lie!" Miss Daisy's language was not always ladylike when she was roused.

"Gently," said Mr. Thorncroft, "let us talk business. I am not complaining, my son is not complaining; under all the circumstances he has no right to complain. But he found some letters in your desk; that desk, if I am not mistaken"—he pointed to a pretty trifle of ebony, inlaid with mother-of-pearl—"they are dated after your marriage."

The blood flushed to her face and neck rose red through the transparent skin, and the long auburn lashes drooped for a second over the bright eyes, but the next she faced him again defiantly.

"I never cared twopence for any of them," she cried, with a sudden shifting of her defence, what the lawyers call confession and avoidance.

"The Divorce Court judge looks only to facts, not sentiment," said Mr. Thorncroft coldly.

"The Divorce Court judge! Do you mean that he—Curley; that Cyril would try to divorce me?"

"And succeed as a matter of course. There is no defence, no legal defence. Sentiment, as I have said, doesn't count in the Courts."

"And marry that other girl?"

Mr. Thorncroft nodded.

"I won't have it, I tell you. I saw them together yesterday at a football match. It must have been she

—a wax-faced doll. It made me mad—I could have killed them both!"

She leaped from her chair and began pacing up and down the room softly, swiftly; her hands tight clenched, her limbs and body moving with subtle easy grace. The resemblance to a sleek young leopard was more marked than ever. She stopped suddenly in front of him, the lurid red light smouldering at the back of her liquid eyes. "Have a care! have a care!" she said—and her voice had a low purring sound, "I would kill her first—I would kill him afterwards. Ha! I have touched you at last!"

If she had really frightened him—and there was deadly purpose in her voice—after the first slight start he gave no sign.

"Don't talk nonsense, my dear," he said, with his cold gaze on her flushed face and blazing eyes. "There are such things as a rope and a hangman."

"I don't care! I don't care!" she cried vehemently, "I will die before I give him up to any woman, but I'll kill her first, I'll kill her first!"

"Oh! you do care," said Mr. Thorncroft more gently. "This is a very pleasant world, especially pleasant for a gay and beautiful young woman. You don't know what's to come after, if there's anything. The priests tell us hell fire. That would hardly suit your constitution. You would like just as little, I fancy, to be wiped out of existence and be nothing for evermore. Yours

is not the proper neck for a rope, nor body for the quicklime. Be reasonable, my dear young lady, don't let us talk of such ugly things as murder or hanging."

"Why drive me to it?"

"I'm not driving you. I don't want to play the game out to the bitter end, unless you insist on it. I want a friendly draw and divide the stakes. You can divorce Cyril; there need be no defence, and no fuss in the newspapers. You will be no worse friends afterwards, and you can make your own terms, so far as money is concerned."

Without a word she began pacing the room again; smoothly, swiftly, as before. Mr. Thorncroft waited. Deep, cool, cunning as he was, he knew so little of the workings of this woman's nature as to fancy that reason could sway her purpose by a hair's breadth. Presently she paused, hesitated for a moment, and dropped into her chair. Still not a word.

"Well?" said Mr. Thorncroft at last very gently.

She answered in a low voice without raising her eyes.

"I'm thinking over what you say. I cannot make up my mind. You are quite determined on this? Cyril is quite determined?"

"Quite, it is the best for all concerned."

"And Cyril is fond of this girl?"

"Madly in love with her—for the present—until he marries her. You know Cyril about women?"

"Oh! yes, I know Cyril. He was madly in love with

me once on a time until I married him. There's no use in trying to get back a man's love if you lose it. I remember when I was a very little girl away in the country I dropped a sixpence—it was the only one I had—into a well. I saw it sink down and I waited for hours for it to sink back again. I've got wiser since that time—perhaps. As you say, Cyril is lost to me and I had best make the best of a bad bargain."

"Quite so," assented Mr. Thorncroft.

"And yet—and yet—I find it so hard to make up my mind. It will be all right, I'm sure, but—I'll write to you, will that do?"

"How soon?"

"Don't hurry me; I won't be hurried"—with sudden pettishness—"about a trifle. Within a week at furthest. What address?"

"The Hôtel Métropole," said Mr. Thorncroft, and he was sorry the moment he said it, for he saw her hands and lips tighten as he spoke with some hidden purpose, and all at once he doubted her sudden gentleness.

"Good-bye," she said at once, with an undertone of mockery in her voice, "and thanks for a very pleasant visit, but you see"—with a glance at her naked feet and a little shuffling in the silken dressing-gown—"I'm hardly in the costume for visitors."

"But I shall hear from you within a week," said Mr. Thorncroft, as he moved awkwardly towards the door.

"Oh! yes, you shall hear from me within a week."

CHAPTER XIV

THE DUEL

As Mr. Thorncroft returned to his hotel walking slowly, he had an uneasy feeling of failure that grew stronger with every step he took. Matched against the unreasoning feline passion of this woman, he felt his own cool cunning adroitness wholly impotent.

On his return he found Curson waiting for him in the hall with an open telegram in his hand.

"I told you so!" he cried excitedly the instant Thorncroft appeared, "but you laughed at me. Now you will see."

Thorncroft sobered him with a look as he took the telegram from his hand and glanced at it.

"My dear Curson," he said blandly, "it is just lunch-hour and I'm so hungry. If you want to speak to me you might come to my bedroom while I wash my hands," and he led the way to the lift.

"You blatant fool!" he said, still very quietly as the bedroom door closed with a snap, "do you want to

bellow our secrets to all London. What is it? what is the meaning of this?"

But Curson instantly relapsed in savage sulkiness. "Find out for yourself," he said rudely, "a blatant fool cannot help you."

Mr. Thorncroft never let his temper hamper his purpose. "Come! come!" he said persuasively, "I spoke hastily and I'm sorry for it. I should have remembered you are a man of the laboratory, not of the street. One cannot expect the commonplace caution of a London solicitor from the greatest scientist in the world."

"I'm not the greatest scientist in the world," Curson retorted still sulkily, "Newman is *his* name—Adam Newman. I told you that before. He knows more than I'll ever know. I believe he has found the great secret. Well, he is against us. He has taken that young bully under his protection. He has made him the wonder of the world. I recognized Newman's handiwork at the football match. It is to Newman we owe this last stumbling-block."

"What last stumbling-block?"

"Una's flight."

"Where do you find that?"

"In the paper in your hand."

"Are you mad? there's nothing of the kind in it. 'Have met an old friend with whom I spend the day. Back in the evening.'"

"That's to gain time."

"Nothing of the sort. Look here, Curson, you and I are not perhaps over scrupulous about the truth."—Curson grinned at the compliment. "But you think every one as—well, let us say—as strong-minded as yourself in these matters. Well, I don't. I know Una, she will come back this evening."

"Well, have it so. Who is the friend she's spending the day with?"

"Very likely it's Miles; if it wasn't I fancy she would have given the name. You say she recognized him at the football match. It was a cursed misfortune you ever went to that match."

"I went to see Newman's handiwork; from what I had heard I guessed it was Newman's handiwork, but I never guessed it was Miles. Well, we must make the best of it, if as you expect the girl comes back. Put on pressure and hurry up the match with Cyril. You found Mrs. Cyril willing, I hope?"

"Damnably unwilling, damnably determined to hold on to Cyril; threatened murder if she were interfered with. She cooled down afterwards, but I don't trust her. A deep, determined, dangerous woman, and more dangerous cold than hot. That Miles and Newman alliance is another difficulty in our way if the man is what you say."

"If!" cried Curson with savage contempt. "I was his pupil for seven years, and I ought to know. He

has the power of a devil or a God, whichever you believe most in."

"Well, we won't argue that point now. Our best plan is to get this girl quietly abroad, leaving no clue. Cyril must have a chance to make her like him. Then he can divorce his amiable wife whenever he chooses. The evidence is clear, though it was mere wantonness prompted her. She doesn't really care two straws for any man but her husband. I don't wonder at it."

"I do," broke in Curson sulkily, his contempt for the handsome Cyril was profound. "He doesn't care twopence for her or any other woman."

"You're wrong," said the father sharply, "he is in love with Una."

"H'm, what he calls love. Well, you needn't get riled; it's no affair of mine so long as he is willing to divorce the other and marry her. The real trouble will be to coax Una out of the country."

"She will have Cyril with her," said Mr. Thorncroft; "besides"—as an afterthought—"she was willing to go."

"That was before she spent the day with her friend," Curson retorted; "you wait and see."

They both proved true prophets, for Una came back that evening, as Thorncroft foretold, and, as Curson foretold, Una refused for entreaty or command to budge one step out of London.

For the first three days she moped expectantly about the hall, ready to smile if Miles appeared, ready to cry that he didn't come. On the third morning she went out before breakfast on her bicycle, and came back in half-an-hour in the dumps.

She was making straight to her bedroom for a good cry, when a lady waiting in the hall intercepted and accosted her.

The quick feminine eye saw the lady was richly though plainly dressed. Her clothes fitted her like a French-woman's, and she carried herself with consummate grace. She was thickly veiled, but Una saw the bright eyes shine through.

"Forgive me if I am wrong," said a low clear voice.
"Are you Mr. Thorncroft's ward—the heiress?"

"I am Una Spencer—Mr. Thorncroft's ward," Una coldly replied. "But——"

"Forgive me again," the clear voice went on pleadingly, "I do not mean to be rude, believe me. I am in sore trouble; only you can help me. I must have a word alone with you, Miss Spencer, for both our sakes."

Una bowed a cold assent, and led the way up the broad staircase to her own private sitting-room on the second landing, opened the door and let the stranger pass in before her. Neither sat, but faced each other waiting. With a sudden motion the visitor threw off her hat and veil together, and showed Una a face of rich and arrogant beauty, crowned with twisted coils of

red-golden hair. A great garish heavy-framed mirror ran from the floor to the ceiling, and the woman gloried in the superb figure that filled it, and then glanced disdainfully aside at Una's gentler beauty. In the scornful light of her tawny eyes there was a challenge which Una's brave spirit was quick to answer.

"You wished to speak to me," she said very quietly, yet in something of the tone of a queen that gives audience to a suppliant, "and I am waiting to hear you."

"I said for your own sake as well as mine, and I meant it," there was an open insolent threat in voice and eyes. "You have done me the worst wrong that woman can do."

"Indeed!" Una dropped languidly into a chair and looked at her curiously as one might watch the antics of some strange creature.

The other winces under her cool contempt. "Indeed! and indeed!" she cried, the smouldering fire in her eyes kindling into a flame, "you have stolen the love of the man I love, or rather you have tried to steal it, for what man with eyes could choose you before me?"

"I steal! I know nothing of you or of your lover. Oh! woman, you are mad!"

"'Tis you who are mad to lie to me. I tell you I know it."

"I have no wish to bandy words with such as you. Think what you like, but go!"

She made a step towards the door to fling it open, but the stranger stepped threateningly in front.

"Not so fast. I will not budge an inch ; you shall not budge an inch until I have your oath that you will never see or speak to him again."

"I tell you I know nothing of you or your lover."

"I tell you again it is a lie. Last Wednesday you were all day alone together. I know it, for I saw you. Ha ! have I found you now ? Oh ! you can blush, my stately innocent, to be caught in the lie though you did not blush to tell it."

Tuesday was the day of the football match, Wednesday of the cycle ride. In her haste and anger Daisy Mordaunt confused the two. So Una falsely deemed it was Miles, not Cyril, she claimed as her lover.

The sudden thrust passed her guard and found her heart. She grew red and pale, shivered, and was silent.

Daisy Mordaunt watched her curiously ; her anger softening. "So you love him too ; don't trouble to deny it. I read it in your face ; better be frank like me. He is worth loving—the finest man in London" (Una thought Miles the finest man in London). "I pity you, but I cannot help you. He is mine, I tell you, mine. I have the first claim, and I will yield to no one living or dead."

A sudden gust of angry jealousy of this beautiful woman swept all other thoughts and feeling from Una's mind.

She leaped from her chair with panting bosom and flaming eyes. The primary passions of love and jealousy were aroused ; all gentle thoughts, habits and restraints fell aside. Stripped to her naked womanhood the innocent young girl boldly matched herself against the audacious reckless woman of the world in this fight for a lover.

"Go!" she cried, and waved an angry hand towards the door as one might chase a troublesome cur from the room.

Daisy Mordaunt's quick wrath rose to meet hers instantly.

"You defy me, you silly insolent doll, you dare to defy me!"

"I refuse to speak a single word more to such as you. Go! I say, or I will have you thrown out by the servants!"

Daisy plunged her hand into the bosom of her dress. Was there a weapon there? May be so; but she did not draw or use it. She looked a beautiful devil at the moment; her dark brows drawn together; her eyes shining with a feline light; her hands tight clenched; her every muscle and nerve tense with rage.

But Una—the gentle, timid Una—faced her without flinching. It may be her courage saved her; the fierce termagant mastered her rage; her right hand came out of her bosom unarmed. "I'll wait my time and chance," she said, "and, by God! I will not wait for ever. My

husband—aye, my husband—has sworn he will never speak to you again. If he breaks his oath, you'll suffer for it. You've had your warning!"

Una stood and waited, silent and scornful. Then as the door closed behind the other, she dropped on a couch like one mortally wounded, shaken to the very heart by an agony of fear. She was dizzy with the sudden reaction; her thoughts whirled round in a confused jumble. But through all the words, "He is my husband," pressed insistently on her aching brain. "It's a lie," she told herself over and over again. But remembering the hateful woman's face and voice when she said it, Una felt it was true. Then with a sharp throb of pain the thought came of Miles' neglect and made assurance sure.

That evening it chanced that Mr. Thorncroft wrung from his son a confession that he had seen his wife again; that she had threatened wholesale murder, and to quiet her he had given a half promise to speak no more to Una.

"'Pon my soul, sir," he said, "it was for Una's sake I promised. Daisy is a dangerous devil when she's roused. She's as gentle as a purring cat till she coaxes your secret out of you. Then she spits and claws."

His father, hearing this artless babble, was more than ever anxious to carry Una out of range of Daisy's devilry and the tattle of the Divorce Court.

In sheer desperation he made yet another attempt to persuade her.

To his amazement she readily consented. "She would go at once," she said, "anywhere he pleased, anywhere out of London."

He lost no time. Two days later the party left the Métropole with a pile of luggage. Curson and Cyril and Una waited together by the luggage while Mr. Thorncroft got the tickets at Cook's office. He did not happen to notice close beside him a woman closely veiled, who entered a moment later. But she saw and heard him ask for three coupons through to Naples.

The very day after their departure Miles, still acting on the sage advice of Mr. Newman, called at the Métropole and sent in his card boldly for Miss Spencer.

"The lady and her party had left," he was politely told.

"When?"

"Two days ago."

"Where?"

The clerk at the office could not say. They left no address. He would inquire of the manager.

He inquired. The manager knew as little as himself—which was nothing.

For the moment Miles was in bewildered despair at this sudden disappearance. He had barely presence of mind to thank the manager for his trouble, and walked dreamily out on the steps, hardly knowing where he went.

"Beg your pardon, sir," said a voice close at his ear as he was half-way down the steps, and turning he saw his admiring friend, the bearded hall-porter, smiling and beckoning.

"Beg your pardon, sir, but I thought I heard you inquiring about a certain young lady which used to ride the bicycle."

Miles nodded in mute wonder.

"Well, I helped the luggage on the hansom when they left. There was a big lady's chest-of-drawers trunk the last thing, and when the hansom drove off I found this in my hand, and I thought as what you might care to see it."

He opened his big hand as he spoke. "This" was a neat luggage-label tied with a broken fragment of very thin twine and on it in pretty handwriting that Miles knew well were the words—

"MISS UNA SPENCER,

"Passenger to Naples."

The porter got a £5 note with a blessing, and in half-an-hour afterwards Miles burst in upon Mr. Newman in his laboratory.

"I'm off to Naples to-morrow," he announced breathlessly, and told his story and showed his label.

"I guess I go too," said Mr. Newman.

CHAPTER XV

PURSUIT

THEY went across the Continent as fast as fire and steam and steel could carry them, resting only for a single night at Aix les Bains.

"They put up here," said Mr. Newman, as the two sat at breakfast next morning, "I have made friends with the landlady, and she described them to me."

"So far then we are on the right track," said Miles joyfully.

"Cyril Thorncroft is of the party," Newman continued, "the landlady raves of him."

"D——n him!"

"Not just yet, please," said Mr. Newman, as he helped himself placidly to another cup of coffee, "he may help us. I have claimed him as my nephew. The landlady is young and pretty, and the young Jackanapes was affable. He told her they were going to Naples through Rome."

"Straight?"

"That's the trouble; he didn't say, perhaps he

couldn't say. I had a try last night to find out for myself."

"But how, how?"

"Eat your breakfast or I'll stop talking. I have sent a wire to Naples. 'Cyril Thorncroft. Englishman. Naples. Did you lose diamond ring in bedroom? Hôtel de Vie. Aix les Bains.' Adelaide, that's the woman's name. The post-office people will find him if he is in Naples."

"But the answer?"

"Oh! Cyril is sure to answer. I guess he'll think it's a love message from the pretty widow; anyway, the diamond will draw him."

"But——"

"Go on with your breakfast, young man. I know what your 'but' means, I have arranged that too. I told the tender-hearted widow I expected a wire from my beloved nephew Cyril. It was of great importance to him that I should get it. Could she—would she forward it to the Hôtel de Londres at Rome? Of course she could and would, 'avec beaucoup de plaisir.' Our directions may be there before us."

They went forward in an hour with many messages from the landlady for "mon pauvre enfant, ce beau Cyril."

Miles was all impatience. Some vague presentiment of a coming danger was upon him, and he paced the long corridors of the train up and down, up and down

as though his quick walking would supplement the speed of the engine.

He passed and re-passed as he walked a lady quietly dressed and thickly veiled, who seemed as impatient as himself.

An icy wind came out to meet them from the frozen jaws of the Alps as they crossed the frontier, and whirled through a tunnel from June to December. All round the snow-capped peaks pierced high into the cold blue sky, but Miles had no eyes for their wild fantastic beauty. His soul had gone on before to Naples. The train glided through the hills back into summer. Miles still paced the corridor. The wondrous tower leaned towards him as he was whirled past Pisa, and vainly claimed his admiration. On through the wide flat Campagna they raced into Rome.

From the station they drove straight to the Hôtel de Londres, and found a telegram re-addressed from Aix les Bains awaiting them there.

"Hôtel di Paradiso, Naples. Keep it, dearest, for my sake. Cyril."

That was all—but it was enough. It hardly needed the signature to identify the sender.

Back from the hotel they went straight across the city to the railway-station for Naples. The shattered bulk of the Coliseum rose before them, vast, stupendous, appalling, fit monument of the savage glories of the old Rome. A turn of the street and the great dome

of St. Peter's towered into the radiant sky, majestic, mysterious type and embodiment of the greatest of Christian creeds.

But Miles cared for none of these things. Rome with its monuments and its memories was nothing to him. A slim woman's figure with a fair wistful face and clear trustful eyes stood between him and the bulk of St. Peter's and the Coliseum, and hid them completely from his view. Such is the nature of man and of love.

All night they rumbled on in the stifling carriage of a slow train to Naples. By noon next day they reached the city of sights and smells.

"Oof!" said Mr. Newman, as they stepped from the frying-pan of the railway-carriage into the fire of the sunshine, "it's as hot as Hades," only he said the last word in English.

But Miles was almost wholly impervious to heat or cold.

"Hôtel di Paradiso," said Mr. Newman, as they tumbled with their bags into one of the little phaetons at the station.

"No, no!" cried Miles in alarm, "wait a bit!"

"What's the matter now?" asked Mr. Newman.

"Wouldn't you like a bath and breakfast?" Miles suggested considerately.

"Of course, but you can get both at the Hôtel di Paradiso—it's the best in Naples."

"But——"

"It will save time; why, I thought you were in a hurry. You have been spurring me along the whole way from Naples."

"Of course, but still—— Oh! hang it all, I don't want to show up in this cut before all the strangers at the hotel."

"I see," said Mr. Newman dryly, "we will turn into the Hôtel de L'Univers on our way. It is a hole of a place, but Purgatory before Paradise."

Less than an hour found them again on their way. Mr. Newman made a short cut through high, narrow streets, where the sky was but a blue ribbon overhead, and at every doorway over the evil-smelling mud the macaroni hung on wooden frames like Japanese string screens, drying in the fierce sunshine; on into broad avenues flanked by palaces on either hand. The Hôtel di Paradiso stood amid orange groves on the high slope behind the city, looking down on the bay. The whole sky was a blaze of sunshine, the still air quivered with the heat. Miles went up the long slope with a step more light than the mountain goat. Mr. Newman lagged placidly behind, smoking a huge havana. Miles had refused to smoke, anxious, as Mr. Newman suggested, to be prepared for all possible contingencies.

Just at the entrance of the hotel grounds, where the oranges and lemons showed golden gleams through the still dark leaves, Miles paused impatiently to wait for

his companion half-way down the slope. Then, in spite of love and haste, the wondrous scene conquered his admiration. The bay lay wide in front, deep blue and glittering under blue sky and sunshine, with the outline of gay Sorrento showing clear on the horizon's edge. In the near foreground the threatening bulk of Mount Vesuvius filled the view, and from his formidable peak he pumped up huge coils of solid smoke into the high clear air, which, trailing slowly across the bay, stretched in a long murky cloud between the clear blue of sea and sky.

As they came at last in front of the hotel, the first figure that met their gaze—neat as a new pin—in light tweed and Homburg hat, seated in the wide, open verandah, with gold spectacles on nose, the *Times* newspaper in hand—was Mr. Thorncroft himself.

He was surprised to see Miles, but delighted—so he said—"and your friend?" he asked.

"Mr. Newman," said Miles.

Mr. Thorncroft started as he heard the name—a very slight and momentary start.

"Delighted to make your acquaintance, Mr. Newman," he said with formal courtesy; "I rather fancy I have heard your name before. You would naturally like to see Una?" he turned to Miles, going with blunt directness straight to the matter in his mind; "well, I regret very much to say you cannot. The fact is, I am a little troubled and perplexed about Una at the present

moment. She has taken a great fancy to our old friend Steven Curson."

It was Mr. Newman's turn to start.

"Do you know our friend?" Thorncroft asked, turning on him sharply.

"I know no one of the name," Mr. Newman replied with candour.

"Ah! I thought you might have heard of him—a very famous man of science. Well, Miles, as I was saying, Una, my niece, Mr. Newman, has taken a great fancy to Curson. They go off on expeditions by themselves, leaving Cyril and myself to console each other as best we can. They started yesterday early, as I thought, to visit Pompeii, but they have not returned, and I have had no news from them. It's most unfortunate, and Una will be so sorry to have missed the chance of seeing her old friend if—— I mean of course when she returns."

He spoke of the mysterious disappearance of his niece as of a small social annoyance.

Miles was utterly aghast. All of a sudden there came to him the certainty—clear and vivid as a running stream over white pebbles—that it all had happened before, that in some other life he had stood at the hotel door in sweltering sunshine, with the orange trees all round and the bay in the background, and heard Mr. Thorncroft in a light grey suit, the *Times* in his left hand, tell the news of Una's disappearance

with Curson. So vivid was the feeling that he seemed to know each word before the other spoke it.

"But what are you going to do about it?" broke from him when Mr. Thorncroft brought his prim formal speech to a close.

"I! Nothing. I will wait here till they return. Possibly they have gone on to Rome. I have the most perfect confidence in Curson."

At this Mr. Newman, who was standing close by, grunted and passed into the hotel, for a long drink, he said. It was in vain Miles protested and entreated. To his vehemence Mr. Thorncroft opposed the air-cushion of placid formality. "There was really nothing could be done," he said, "but wait. Inquiry might cause scandal." Over and over again he repeated he had the greatest confidence in Curson.

Presently the superb Cyril, radiant in a suit of white China silk, with a gorgeous tartan cummerband and wide-leaved Panama hat, strolled out of the hotel to join them. His indolent, insolent inanities raised Miles' anger to fever-heat.

"If you won't stir in the matter, sir, I will," he cried. "I'll advertise in the papers; I'll put the police in motion; I'll find her somehow."

"Please yourself," said Mr. Thorncroft coolly. Cyril sniggered. In a towering rage Miles started to walk down the slope, with a stride long and light as a greyhound.

Mr. Newman, who had at that moment emerged from the hotel, paused a second to apologize to Mr. Thorncroft. "You must pardon our young friend," he said, "he is hot-headed and outspoken."

Then he shouted and ran after his young friend, and Miles pulled up and waited for him.

CHAPTER XVI

A VOICE IN THE AIR

"WHAT do you mean by it?" said Mr. Newman, panting as he thrust his arm into Miles'. "Is this weather for foot-racing?"

But Miles still boiled over with wrath. "I'll write to the newspapers," he persisted, "I'll go straight to the police."

"Go straight to the devil!" retorted Mr. Newman contemptuously. "What do the newspapers or the police know about it—what could they do about it—what could you ask them to do?"

"But," Miles persisted, "something must be done. You have told me this Curson is an unmitigated scoundrel."

"Precisely, and I begin to suspect that your honest and respectable Mr. Thorncroft is little better. Now listen and walk a little slower, you lift me off the ground at every stride. While you were talking, I strolled into the hotel for a look around. I even took the liberty of peeping into Mr. Thorncroft's room.

There was a telephone in it — the very latest pattern. Nothing wonderful about that, you'll say, there were a score of telephones to the Métropole. Yes, but there are telephone wires running to the Métropole and none to the Hôtel di Paradiso."

"Then it was a dummy?"

"Dummy be d——d." Mr. Newman used bad language when excited. "You have heard of wireless telegraphy?"

"Of course."

"But you have not heard of wireless telephoning. There are just two men that know of it. Adam Newman holds the patent, but Steven Curson knows the secret. The telephone in Mr. Thorncroft's room, with the copper wire twisted out of the window and up the wall, was put there by Curson. He and Thorncroft talk to each other by telephone through the thin ether."

"If what you say is true——" Miles began.

"I know it's true," Mr. Newman interrupted.

"So be it," said Miles—his faith in Newman's scientific miracles was profound. "It proves that Uncle Thorncroft is a liar, but how does it help us to find Una? What can we do?"

"We can play the eavesdropper," said Mr. Newman, "we can tamper with their messenger. The ether is a leaky confidante of secrets." Then with sudden irrelevance, "You can manage a boat—a sailing-boat, Miles?"

"A little."

"All right. I know what that means when you say 'a little.' We'll go fishing—for secrets."

When they got back to the narrow streets, Mr. Newman, who seemed to know the town as if it were his native village, turned into an electrician's shop and made some purchases. Thence he drove fast as a raw-boned skeleton of a horse could carry them to the hotel where their baggage was, and stuffed a travelling bag with a number of strange appliances he carried with him in all his wanderings. Finally, he loaded up the little phaeton with food and drink from the best restaurant in Naples, and drove down to the harbour where the sparkling blue water lapped the sides of the pier, and seemed to cool their fevered blood by the mere sight of it.

Mr. Newman chose his boat—a four-ton fishing-smack, with long, rakish spars and big sails.

The owner got them on board and made ready to sail.

"We go alone," said Mr. Newman in excellent Italian spoken through his nose.

It was like drawing the cork out of a soda-water bottle—the owner foamed over with eloquent protestations.

A deposit of the full value of the boat disposed of all his disinterested solicitude for the safety of the most illustrious signors, and presently under easy sail, with Miles at the tiller, the boat glided smoothly out over the shining waters of the bay.

Mr. Newman was busy beside him on the deck with cells and batteries and a coil of stout copper wire.

"They must have expected our coming," he said to Miles, "but how, I cannot imagine. By Jingo! I have it—that wire from Aix les Bains. Your pretty coxcomb cousin is just the man to boast of it, and his father just the man to guess. Still, why should they be so frightened of us if there were no other cause, and how did Curson get your cousin to go away alone with him? He used to dabble a bit in mesmerism in the old days, but—"

"Here!" he interrupted himself suddenly, "like a good boy, just run up to the top of the mast with that," and he handed Miles a coil of copper wire; "let the end stick out a few inches over the top."

No other man in the world could have performed the feat. But Miles climbed like a cat up the slender mast that hardly bent with his weight, trailing the wire after him as he climbed.

Meanwhile, Newman fastened a trumpet-shaped telephone to the mast.

"Curson and Thorncroft," he explained to Miles when he stood on the deck beside him, "are not more than fifty miles apart. That is the present effective range of the wireless telephone, though I hope the time is not so far distant when I will be able to send a voice flying like lightning all round the world. We have set a trap to catch those flying voices. When

Thorncroft speaks into the wireless telephone in his bedroom, we will hear his words here on this deck in the middle of the bay as plainly as you hear mine."

"But," Miles objected, credulous, though bewildered, "you don't even know the direction?"

"The direction does not matter in the least," Newman explained; "the subtle electric waves which Mr. Thorncroft sets flying radiate from their centre, as you have seen the widening circles of the water when you drop a stone into a pool. Moving through the all-permeating ether, they pass unimpeded over land and water, through walls and mountains. The radius of their circle is fifty miles, and within that vast circumference nothing can escape."

"But how is it possible—" Miles began.

The enthusiastic scientist interrupted with eager explanation. "It's as simple as kiss hands. When Thorncroft speaks into the telephone receiver in his room, the air vibrates to his words, the vibrations are repeated in the elastic membrane of the receiver. These vibrations are converted by the telephone into electric waves of varying length which spread, as I have shown you, through all space. Now here on this deck I have an electric battery connected with the receiver. The circuit of my battery is broken by this small tube filled by metal filings, through which in their present state the current cannot pass. But it is the strange quality of the electric waves of which I

spoke, to make these filings a good conductor of the electric current. As Mr. Thorncroft speaks, the electric waves alternately make and break the current of my battery; they block or clear the road to my receiver, and so you see——”

Newman broke off abruptly, for Miles was gazing at him with the glassy glare of utter vacuity; his face a picture of blank bewilderment. The man of the world instantly replaced the scientist in Mr. Newman.

“We had better let the anchor go, and have lunch,” he said cheerily, and Miles bustled at once into intelligent activity.

It was a delightful meal spread on a white cloth on the white deck. The still beauty of the scene gave a finer flavour to food and wine. The sun filled the whole wide hollow dome of the sky with light, and strewed jewels on the blue floor of the sea. Around them small boats glided, specks of white and red. The city—terrace after terrace—sloped back from the sea’s edge, fringed with the dark green of orange and lemon groves, and further still stood great Vesuvius, its cone sharp outlined against the blue sky, spouting black smoke. A cool breeze moving softly over the face of the water tempered the fierce heat.

Even Miles seemed to forget his trouble for a moment as he ate, drank, and chatted and gained hope from Newman’s confident serenity.

He stopped open-mouthed—in one hand a glass of

amber wine with a cream of white froth on it, and in the other the white wing of a fat capon—for the bell of the telephone at the mast rang suddenly of its own accord.

Silence followed, and then out of space came the single word "Halloa!" in the unmistakable voice of Randal Thorncroft.

The thing was uncanny. Miles listened petrified by surprise.

"Halloa!" cried the same voice again impatiently, "are you there?"

"Well," came the answer in a deeper tone, the sulky voice of Steven Curson, materialized, so to speak, out of electric waves, "what do you want?"

"They have come."

"I cannot hear you plainly; say it again."

"They have come."

"Who have come?"—very impatiently in Curson's voice.

"Don't be a fool!" Thorncroft answered. "Both Miles and the woman. Miles called at the hotel. I saw the woman in the street as I followed them, and she saw me."

"Did Miles come alone?" The words were very distinctly spoken by Curson. They could notice the eagerness in his voice that came through the trumpet of the telephone out of empty space.

"Of course not. His bear leader came with the cub, and the bear leader is your special friend Newman."

There was a growl like a stifled curse.

"That's bad. What do you mean to do ? "

"Get away from both as quickly and as quietly as I can. How is the girl doing ? "

"Splendid, half asleep, half awake, and as obedient as a wax doll."

"That's right. Now listen ; can you hear me ? "

"Perfectly."

"I want you and the girl to get quietly on the Oriental boat next Sunday. It starts at midnight. Cyril and I will join you on board, and we can slip back to England, leaving our friends to watch each other here. Do you understand ? "

"Certainly."

"And can manage it ? "

"Easily. There will be no trouble. There is a boat goes in from here on Saturday night to meet the mails."

"That means they are at Sorrento," whispered Newman to Miles, who sat tongue-tied, motionless with amazement.

"Sunday midnight, don't fail," repeated Thorncroft's voice impressively.

"No fear," came Curson's sulky response.

The bell gave another faint tinkle, and then there was silence over the wide sea.

CHAPTER XVII

'ALONE ON THE WIDE, WIDE SEA'

MILES and Newman from an hour before midnight loitered on the crowded pier where the shadows of the moonlight fell blackest, but always within sight of the steamer's gangway, on to which the crowds converged.

"Una!" whispered Miles; "Murdock," whispered Newman, at the same moment as a man and woman passed close beside them in the white glare of the moonlight.

"Easy! easy!" Newman continued earnestly, and laid a persuasive hand on Miles' trembling arm; "keep cool, man; don't move; this needs time and thought. Your Steven Curson is my Kinard Murdock. I would know him in a million. I was right too in my guess that he has practised his devil's art of mesmerism on the girl. Did you notice how pale she was—did you notice how her whole body seemed to sway towards him as she walked?"

"Did I notice! I'll strangle the scoundrel with my bare hands."

Miles' whole body was quivering with rage, but the light touch of Newman's hand held him.

"Steady! my boy, for the girl's sake if not for your own. You don't know what mesmerism means in the hands of an evil man like Curson. I do. See, they have passed over the gangway. She remains on deck; Murdock has gone below. You will have a chance to speak to her presently and set your influence against his. By Jove! there goes the bell! What the devil delays—Ah!"

They shrank closer into the shadows, for Mr. Thorncroft and his son came leisurely down the pier together. Mr. Thorncroft glanced sharply behind him. Then they quickened their pace as they neared the gangway, and vanished promptly into the bowels of the steamer.

"Now!" whispered Mr. Newman. The bell was ringing clamorously and the crowds crossed and crushed on the gangway of those that went and went.

They were almost the last to cross, but looking back Miles saw that the very last was a lady. Her face was veiled, but something in the easy grace of her figure caught his memory. He could have sworn it was the same lady whom he had passed and repassed in his restless tramp along the corridor of the train to Naples.

The huge steamer puffed and snorted, and then slowly the pier and the crowd on it began to slide past her side. The night was still as death. The

myriad lights of the city shone through clear air over smooth water. From the peak of Vesuvius there towered a huge volume of smoke, spreading into a black cloud at the summit and lurid at the base with flame. The fires of hell shone in the scars in the mountain's rugged sides. The bay was like a mirror, smooth and bright in the moonshine, and the waves from the ship's prow seemed to spread to the horizon.

Presently the passengers who had watched the receding city with many "ohs" and "ahs" of wonder and admiration, began to vanish from the deck in quest of cabins and comfort. From the first Miles had never taken his gaze from the slim, white figure that leaned pensively on the rails towards the stern of the steamer.

He passed and repassed twice before he could summon up courage to speak to her.

"Una!"

She turned slowly round at the sound of his voice. "So you are coming too, Miles. I'm very glad." There was no hint of surprise at seeing him in her welcoming voice or eyes.

Even as in a dream when we meet a friend long absent—it may be long dead—we greet him quietly with delight indeed, but without surprise.

Miles, who had his warning from Newman, accepted the situation as he found it. "Yes, I'm coming too,"

he answered. "There is a seat yonder. Shall we sit down? I want a talk with you."

She moved obediently beside him to a seat in the black shadow and sat silent, while poor Miles, in a very fever of excitement, worried his brain for words.

Neither saw a figure that watched them jealously—a woman's figure that moved with the graceful stealth of a leopard.

"Una," said Miles at length, and his words and voice sounded in his own ears insufferably tame and commonplace, "do you remember our last meeting?"

"Well, Miles," she answered in the same even tone, "I have thought much of it since. I have even dreamt of it often. I was wrong to meet you, wrong to spend the day with you. I felt it vaguely at the time; the thought has grown almost to pain since then."

He winced as a child winces and shirks a threatened blow.

"Don't, Una, don't! You cannot know how it pains me to hear you say so. For me that day was the happiest in my life."

"But it was wrong; it was wrong," she persisted monotonously, like one that says a lesson by heart. "It is our duty to keep apart."

"It is our duty to come together," he persisted vehemently, "for I love you, Una, I love you, my darling, better than the world and all the world holds; better than my own life and soul!"

She looked up at him wonderingly and frightened ; her cheeks pale, her eyes large, dark and shining in the moonlight, her bosom heaving tumultuously under a trembling foam of soft white lace. Her whole frame quivered with emotion. It seemed as if some will wrestled fiercely with her own and held it. She moaned aloud in the agony of the struggle ; there was a piteous appeal in her face.

He put out his arms to catch her to him, to hold her safe against the world, but she slipped from his clasp and fled shudderingly.

He would have followed her, but at the same moment he saw the figure of a woman coming swiftly down the deck, and for Una's sake he feared a scene.

The black shadow met the white midway. Miles heard a low frightened cry of recognition from Una's lips and the one word "Cyril" hissed back in answer. At the same moment the dark figure seemed to stumble, lurched swiftly forward and caught the white in her arms. There was a second's struggle, then Una pitched headlong over the vessel's side, while the other fell back into the shadow.

Miles leaped to the bulwark and stood for an instant poised like a bird on the narrow rim. With parted lips and straining eyes he peered into the rushing water. He saw far down a white, wavering shadow go swiftly past the vessel's side, and like a hawk on its prey he dived for it.

But he hit the water like a cork and came back with a rebound that lifted half his body clear from the surface. He plunged and splashed and struggled frantically, hopelessly. The water held him up as helpless as a log, while below the white shadow flickered, and the unconscious Una glided swiftly by to her doom.

It was a moment of unutterable agony. But slowly, slowly as it passed the white figure wavered to the surface, looming larger as it came. Una's pale face showed for a second over the water; a bubbling scream broke from her lips, and she slowly sank again. But with a forward plunge that lifted him clear from the water, like a leaping salmon Miles caught her flowing hair and drew her lightly to his arms.

Again she screamed and clutched and clung to him with the death-grip of the drowning. But he floated serene as a life-buoy, and her frantic struggles could not pull him under.

Her screams thrilled through the naked silence of the night.

His right arm was held fast in her frantic clutch, but he slipped his left through the tepid water round her waist and lifted her head and shoulders over the smooth sea.

Then all at once her screaming ceased. She looked at him with eyes large and bright in the moonlight, and full of fear and wonder, like one waking from a nightmare.

"Miles!" she whispered.

"Yes, Una. It is I; have no fear."

"I dreamt," she faltered, "that I was in a ship. That awful woman caught and flung me into the sea, that— Oh! we are in the sea, we are drowning together." Her frightened whisper swelled into a wail.

"Hush! Una, hush! there is nothing to fear. We are in the sea, but I can save you, and I will."

"But the ship?" she persisted.

Standing head and shoulders above the water he could look far over the smooth and shining surface, white with the moonlight. The steamer had glided away into the distance. He could see its black outline against the horizon. The clamour of its machinery came to them—a faint rhythmical pulsation through the silence. In the wide sea, under the wide sky, they two were alone.

But Miles had no more fear than the sea-bird that rests its downy bosom securely on the waves. The sea held and lifted him as buoyantly. The pressure of Una's weight was hardly felt. The water was warmer than the air, and both were warm. In his heart he blessed the transformation that made him master of the sea.

• "The ship is gone," he said.

"I am glad," was the strange reply; "I feel I am safer in the water than in the ship; safe with you, Miles."

Her courage had come back to her. The steady pressure of his arm, the confident tones of his voice, begot an equal confidence in her. She felt herself upheld upon the water, floating as lightly as in a boat, and accepting the miracle, forgot to fear or wonder.

"Oh! Miles," she went on, "I seem to have awakened from an awful dream. I had no real thought or feeling; I was numbed, half-conscious, everything was vague to me except that fearful man, whose cruel eyes looked into my very soul and frightened me almost to death." Miles felt her heart's quick beat under the pressure of his arm. "I woke up suddenly in the strangling water; I thought the end had come. Tell me," after a pause, "did I see you and speak to you just before I fell?"

"Yes, Una," Miles answered, and the thought that she had forgotten her own words was a joy to him. The longing was strong to clasp her to his breast and pour out the love that the sound of her voice, the touch of her body sent quivering through his veins with an intensity that was like pain. But an honest manliness restrained him from abusing his advantage. "We will not speak of that now," he said; "when we are safe on land I will ask your leave to speak again. You must be tired, Una, weak and tired."

"Oh! I am very tired," she answered, as simply as a little child,

"Then rest; I will watch. We can do nothing till the daylight comes."

It was indeed perfect rest; the gentlest pressure of his arm sustained her in the water which yielded to every motion more softly than a bed of down. She was utterly exhausted, and nature cried out for sleep not to be denied. Her eyelids drooped and rose and drooped again. With a soft little sigh of contentment her head declined upon his shoulder, and she slept.

The fiery heat of his passion died softly away as he watched over her sleeping, and the protecting tenderness of a mother took its place.

He was impatient to be in motion, to make for land. But he had no notion in which direction land lay, and swimming might only serve to carry him further to sea. So he waited and watched through the long silent night, curbing his impatience. The full moon went up the sky almost to the zenith, and then shed softly down, the white light fading from its broad face as it neared the horizon's edge and vanished.

The stars showed faint and pale; a fresh breeze sprung up before the dawn; it was dim grey twilight over the face of the waters. Miles' sole thought was for Una. His arm had not slackened round her waist; her head still rested placidly on his shoulder. But the sea was no longer smooth, and they swayed and drifted before the rising waves. Slowly, slowly the light died out of sea and sky, and the wind still freshened and the waves rose. Then slowly again the darkness began to give place to

the dawn. It was at first a dim grey but all-pervading twilight that permeated the sea and sky and air. It grew and grew, and Miles' eyes could see the hillocks of green water with the foam edging their crests, in which they softly rose and fell, and still the light grew. The sky brightened in the east, from faintish pink to burning crimson. Suddenly, as it seemed, a broad eye of flaming gold flashed up over the horizon, and in a moment all the heaven was full of radiance.

Una woke with a start and cry. But remembrance came to her in a moment. "I have been asleep," she said, "asleep in the wide, open sea. Was there ever anything so wonderful! How weary you must be, Miles, watching all the while."

"Not in the least, Una," he answered. "It has been a delight to me to see you sleep."

She shivered at the rising waves. A white crest slapped her in the face and made her gasp and pant.

"But there is a storm coming, Miles," she whispered, "we shall be drowned after all. Even you cannot hold out for ever."

"The winds and waves are helping us," he answered cheerily. "The land is there in front. Wait till a big wave lifts us. Now! now! you can see the headland clearly—that dark line against the sky; it cannot be more than two or three miles away. There is a large boat far out; you can hardly see it in the red glare, but it is heading away from us. We must make a push for

land. Put your arm across my shoulders, Una ; so, lean on me more heavily, as heavily as you can ; try to push me down ; that's right."

With long strong strokes he oared himself through the water like a canoe aided by wind and current.

Nearer and nearer grew the dark curve of the headland, seen at intervals over the crest of the waves.

Suddenly there was a cry of terror from Una, who, trailing behind the swimmer, had glanced back over her shoulder.

"Look, Miles, look !" she cried, "there is a ship coming straight upon us !"

Miles turned and breasted the waves, which sent the foam flying into his face. But the sea was not the danger.

A large fishing-boat with red sails taut was running before the wind on an even keel ; her prow lifted and fell as it clove the waves. When Una cried out the boat was scarce a hundred yards away. On she came swiftly, unswervingly, as if some devil steered her straight as an arrow to the mark.

Miles leapt high out of the water and shouted, but the din of the waves swallowed up his voice.

"My scarf," panted Una.

She tore a light white silk shawl from her shoulders and thrust it into his hand.

Again Miles leaped and shouted and waved the white scarf in the wind.

The boat was scarce fifty yards away. But the white gleam of the scarf was seen. At the touch of the rudder the swift vessel swerved as the skater swerves on smooth ice, and shot past them so closely that they rocked in her trail. She came to as swiftly on the land side, with her sails flapping in the wind.

A boat dropped from her side, and in five minutes they were safe aboard,—Una pitied and petted by the women; Miles wondered at and applauded by the men.

CHAPTER XVIII

THE SPRING-TIME OF LOVE

WHEN they landed a quarter of an hour later in the tiny harbour, the story of their miraculous adventure spread over the small sea-side town as rapidly as oil spreads over water, and they were at once overwhelmed with kindly offers of assistance from swarms of bright-eyed, excited, gesticulating Italians.

But Miles had luckily found his well-filled purse in his pocket, and would accept nothing more than sympathy.

His first thought—when he had seen Una comfortably settled at her hotel—was to wire to Newman at Marseilles, the next stopping-place of the Oriental boat—

“Una and I safe. We go straight on to Venice. You will find letter there at the Poste Restante.”

In the afternoon they started on their journey to Venice through the fair land of blue skies and sunshine and fields alive with gaily-dressed gatherers of the grape,

a dream of heaven to the young lovers, though still no word of love was spoken between them.

It was night when they arrived in the strange and beautiful city—the strangest and the most beautiful in the world.

As they walked to the edge of the railway platform, Una started back and clutched Miles' arm with a little cry of fright. She had almost stepped straight into the canal, where the gondola was waiting to carry them through the intricate waterways of the city to their hotel.

Una nestled closer to Miles in the high stern of the black boat, as with a sweep of his long oar the gondolier sent them flying through the crooked and narrow liquid lanes where the houses on either hand rose sheer from the water to the sky, and the black shiny floor was paved with stars.

In and out through the maze he swept with a weird cry of warning at the corners, skirting by a hair's breadth, as it seemed, the sharp stone angles of the houses that at a touch would have gone crashing through the frail sides of the boat and have sent her gurgling down to the depths of the black canal.

“Oh! oh! oh!” A cry of inarticulate admiration and delight broke suddenly from Una's lips, for down a long, narrow laneway, under a bridge that seemed no wider than a tall man's stride, they glided suddenly into a broad expanse of illuminated water, with the long high

rows of the palaces on either hand that flamed with light. Here and there gondolas flitted, decked with lanterns from prow to stern, whose reflection showed many coloured on the wide floor of smooth water.

A clear voice floated heavenwards through the still air. Another joined and yet another in tuneful chorus, till eyes and ears were faint with excess of loveliness and sweet sounds.

"It is the Grand Canal," said prosaic Miles to Una, as they threaded their way smoothly through the illuminated gondolas.

"Profane! profane!" she whispered back reprovingly, "it is the entrance gate to heaven."

The gondolier ran their boat deftly beside a landing-place, where men and women in gay summer dress sat on a verandah, bareheaded in the still night, watching the boats and listening to the music. Behind them a brilliant hall opened into a palace.

A gondola left as they arrived. It had brought three of their fellow-passengers to Venice. There was a murmur of whispering and quick glances of sympathy in the verandah as Miles and Una passed through into the hall of the hotel. Their story had come before them.

To Una as a special honour was allotted the room which tradition called the "Chamber of Desdemona." That night she stepped timidly out from the open window on a balcony hung high over the shining city where doubtless the gracious maiden Desdemona, for whose matchless

sorrows the world still weeps, sat alone to ponder in her heart over the wondrous tales of her swarthy lover. The memory of that sad story, joined with the loveliness of the night and the faint music on the shining water far below, thrilled Una's soul with a timid rapture of fear and hope, whose meaning she could vaguely guess, for sadness and soft music are the food of love.

The morning broke cheerily and love took brighter colours in the sunshine. Three days went swiftly by in the florid bewildering beauty of Venice. They were supremely happy to be together. It was an ethereal honeymoon. Love had no share in their words, but lay warm in their hearts, half hidden even from themselves. So they lived contentedly in the present, like the child for whom the day's delights are all-sufficing. The wonderful pillars and palaces of the Grand Square, clear outlined and radiant in intense sunshine, made them dizzy with delight, till Una stooped for relief from excess of beauty to feed the pigeons that strutted on the pavement, so lavishly that she was canopied by the gleaming wings of the eager flutterers. They fed their souls on the strange traditions and exhaustless beauty of churches and palaces and picture galleries, and climbed up the winding slope to the summit of the Campanile and gazed wide over the city of marvels. They floated for hours at a stretch in a softly-gliding gondola on the smooth blue waters of the Lagoon, and

drank in happiness through every sense, and loved the lovely world most because they were together in it.

While they were thus glorying in the wonders of Venice the Oriental steamboat which they had quitted so abruptly three nights before, came panting up to the pier in far-away Marseilles.

Amid the rush of the passengers coming and going there hurried a telegraph boy in uniform, waving a telegram in his hand and crying, "Monsieur Nooman, Monsieur Nooman."

Adam Newman chanced to be below at the moment, pondering broken-heartedly on the mysterious vanishing of Miles, whom the lonely man had learned to love like a son.

But Mr. Thorncroft was on the deck, alert and business-like as ever. The cry caught his quick ear. He shouted and beckoned to the boy.

"Monsieur Nooman?" the boy queried, when he reached him through the crowd.

"*Oui, oui,*" said Mr. Thorncroft impatiently, and he took the telegram from the boy's hand, and gave him in return a couple of nickel coins, with which he departed rejoicing. Mr. Thorncroft read the telegram, and then quickly and quietly gathered their baggage together and disembarked, with Curson and Cyril at his heels. But while he stood with Curson on the quay beside their baggage, and Cyril loitered up the street, Adam Newman—as it chanced—came slowly

across the gangway. Mr. Thorncroft at the moment was showing the telegram to Curson. He instantly thrust it into his pocket, but Newman limped by without seeming to notice.

Without seeming to notice ! but the sight of those two men leaving the boat on sudden summons sent a thrill of unreasoning hope and joy through every fibre of his body. Instinctively he guessed that the telegram which Thorncroft had hidden so eagerly held news of Una and Miles. How it came or whence it came he could not guess. It told that Una and Miles still lived, or there was no need to hide it ; no need of this secret evasion and pursuit.

So it chanced that when Mr. Thorncroft and Steven Curson and Cyril, languidly discontented, booked their places for the long and weary journey to Venice, Mr. Newman, unknown to them, travelled by the same train. A fifth passenger from the boat also forfeited her London ticket and broke the journey at Marseilles.

Mr. Thorncroft readily secured the letter from Miles that lay for Adam Newman at the Poste Restante, Venice, and read the story of their miraculous escape. From the Post Office he went straight to their address, while Newman started on an inquiry from hotel to hotel along the Grand Canal. The story of the brave signor and the lovely signora, and the strange night rescue in the Bay of Naples had spread over romantic Venice, and there was hardly a gondolier on the canals

who could not point to their hotel. So Newman quickly found the information the stolen letter should have supplied.

On the morning of their fourth day in Venice, Una and Miles were together in a small reception-room, with a balcony in front that looked out over the shining water. The old-time palace transformed into a modern hotel, like a gentlewoman compelled by poverty to menial service, still preserved gracious tokens of its former stateliness. The room in which they sat was rich in dark oak carvings and lovely painted panels of the days when every artisan in Venice was an artist. No gaudy modern ornament insulted their antique grace.

Una and Miles had stepped out on the balcony by the water, their back to the room door, when a German English-speaking waiter entered.

"A gentleman vishes to see the signor," he said.

"Newman!" Miles cried in delight, and hurried hastily to greet his friend.

Mr. Thorncroft stood at the doorway, unruffled by trouble or travel; spick-span, imperturbable as Miles had last seen him in Naples.

His manner was stiff and formal and precise, as if nothing of any consequence had happened since then.

"My dear Una!" and he gave her a prim kiss on the forehead. "My dear Miles!" and he stretched him a loose, cool hand of congratulation, "you really

had an almost miraculous escape. I am delighted to see you both again, looking so well, too, after that unfortunate accident."

"But how did you——" Miles began.

"How did I discover you? That's very easily told. You remember you sent a telegram to Mr. Newman. He naturally communicated the contents to me, as of course you intended. Mr. Newman had urgent private business in London, and he asked me to look you up in Venice in his stead."

"You do not mean to say," Miles protested, "that Newman went straight on, never caring what became of us?"

"Oh! I would not put it that way. I have no doubt he cared very much, very much indeed; but of course business claims are paramount, and he knew I'd see to it. He went straight on certainly. He is in London by this time."

"I beg your pardon," said a voice with a faint American twang in it—and Mr. Newman himself walked into the room.

CHAPTER XIX

AN ARMISTICE

MR. THORNCROFT, not in the faintest degree abashed at the unexpected entrance of Mr. Newman, was the first to find his tongue.

"How do you do, Mr. Newman!" he said with cool formality. "I am glad to see you. I had thought you would have been in Gibraltar by this."

Mr. Newman glanced back at him curiously over his shoulders as he shook hands with Miles, but said nothing.

"I took the liberty of opening your telegram," Mr. Thorncroft continued placidly, as if it were quite the natural and proper thing for a respectable solicitor to do. "I saw at once that I was more interested in its contents than you were. Indeed I have some reason to complain, I think, that the telegram was not in the first instance addressed to me. But as my nephew was naturally excited I am content to overlook that. Of course it was necessary for me to come at once to Venice to reclaim my ward, and I had to leave the

boat so hastily that I had not even an opportunity of communicating with you on the subject."

"And my letter?" asked Mr. Newman, wisping in his hand the telegram Mr. Thorncroft had politely handed him. He seemed rather amused than annoyed at the other's imperturbable coolness.

"Of course I got the letter also," Mr. Thorncroft answered. "I assumed that you would desire me to get it, and I have now much pleasure in restoring it; a very nicely-written and interesting letter, I assure you."

Mr. Newman glanced through Miles' letter with wrinkled brows, but his keen grey eyes twinkled when he raised them again to Mr. Thorncroft's face.

"What next, Mr. Thorncroft?" he asked.

"If my ward will kindly pack up," Mr. Thorncroft answered, "I have a gondola ready to take her and her things to my hotel, where she will find her luggage and friends."

Una's face clouded suddenly, like a child's when its holiday is unexpectedly cut off.

Miles broke out with angry protest. "If she does I'll be——" the last word stuck in his throat, and Mr. Newman quietly interposed, imperturbable as Mr. Thorncroft himself. Instinctively the young people left the duel to him. The thought flashed through Una's mind and made her cheeks dimple and eyes sparkle, in spite of anxiety that they were the Babes

in the Wood that the good robber and the wicked were fighting for.

"Gently! gently!" said Mr. Newman. "We must not be in such a hurry, Mr. Thorncroft. Suppose for a moment that the young lady does not wish to go back with you?"

"I cannot suppose anything so unreasonable," Mr. Thorncroft rejoined. "I am her guardian, the trustee of the property—the very considerable property she takes under the will of the late Mr. Bronder. Her proper home is Oakdale, to which I purpose returning. She has no other."

"I guess you're wrong there," Mr. Newman said. "Miles and I would manage to rig up a shanty for her if she so decided. But we will let that pass for the present. Suppose, I say again—it's quite preposterous I admit—but suppose that the young lady doesn't want to go back with you and that we won't have her forced?"

"In such an extreme case I would be reluctantly compelled to appeal to the law."

"Venice is not England, Mr. Thorncroft."

"I am aware of that fact, Mr. Newman. My appeal would be made to the English ambassador. That would involve an unavoidable scandal, of course, which I would deeply regret. Miss Spencer's name would be coupled with my nephew's. There would doubtless be much talk of a silly and impressionable young heiress and an unscrupulous young fortune-hunter."

Una blushed, but her clear eyes met her uncle's without wincing.

"It's a lie!" Miles blurted out.

"Of course, of course," Mr. Thorncroft assented politely, "but the talk will not on that account be less venomous or more pleasant for Una or yourself. We must consider the lady's feelings, my dear Miles."

"Right you are," said Mr. Newman; "but there's just one or two other things to be considered. You will remember, Mr. Thorncroft, you deceived us about the young lady at Naples?"

"Quite so," Mr. Thorncroft assented.

"You lied to us, Mr. Thorncroft."

"If you wish to put it that way, perhaps yes. It is a very rude word."

"It is; I won't repeat it. But you deceived us, and deceit begets suspicion."

"Naturally. I have no objection to explain so far as possible. Miss Spencer was in hiding because she was in danger."

"From us?" asked Mr. Newman incredulously.

"Not from you. But I could not tell her hiding-place even to you. If you read the account in that most interesting letter in your hand of how Miss Una *fell* overboard you will see I am not talking at random."

Mr. Newman read with puckered brows and nodded assent.

"In Oakdale," Mr. Thorncroft continued in the same even tones, "Miss Spencer in her own rooms where she has lived from her childhood would be quite safe; or she could have the cottage in the demesne if she preferred it."

"And Mr. Murdock, Mr. Thorncroft, we don't like your Mr. Murdock."

"Mr. Murdock!" Mr. Thorncroft repeated puzzled.

"Call him what you like—your scientific friend Murdock."

"Oh! you mean Mr. Curson—one of the kindest and gentlest of men, I assure you. There ought to be a fellow-feeling between you, you dabble a little in science yourself I'm told, Mr. Newman." It was said in exactly the same tone of tolerant contempt in which he might have said, "You do a little amateur photography," and Mr. Newman's eyes twinkled with amusement.

"But we need not trouble about Mr. Curson," Thorncroft went on sedately, "he does not purpose returning to Oakdale. His work calls him to London."

"Mr. Thorncroft, sir," Mr. Newman began again, and the nasal twang was more pronounced than ever as his words dropped Yankee fashion into the formal phrases of a little set speech, "I have no authority to negotiate for the principals in this business. But I flatter myself I have some influence with my young friend Mr. Miles Broder, and possibly my young friend may have some influence with the young lady. It will lead to

general satisfaction if you will allow us three to consider the answer to your proposal."

"You wish me to retire?"

"That is my meaning, Mr. Thorncroft."

"Certainly, certainly; there is no hurry. In any event I purpose spending a few days with my son in Venice, which I regard as a very interesting city."

"Oh! I must go," said Una, as the door closed on his formal bow.

"You shan't!" cried Miles.

Both looked to Mr. Newman as an umpire. It is hard to say which was the more disappointed when he said quietly, "I think you ought."

"I told you so," faltered Una. There was none of the customary triumphant aggressiveness in the obnoxious phrase.

"But why? why?" Miles demanded, rebelling almost for the first time against the authority of his whimsical mentor. "Surely you don't trust him or his hang-dog confederate Curson?"

"Gently! gently! we'll talk the thing over. Sit down, Miss Spencer. You'd better sit down, Miles, it will keep you quiet, and there's room for two on that seat. To begin with, Curson or Murdock is out of the question. He stays in London when Mr. Thorncroft and Miss Una go back to Oakdale."

"How can we be sure?" Miles interrupted.

"I'll have a written agreement with Thorncroft, and

a further condition that you are to see Miss Una whenever you please—subject to her approval, of course."

"But why lose sight of her at all?" cried Miles, with an eager look that sent the blood rushing to Una's cheeks. "Why need she go back? why cannot she stay with us? Why does he want to hide her away in Oakdale as he hid her in Sorrento? There will be some more devilment between Curson and himself."

"There won't!" Mr. Newman said sharply, "there cannot! Curson is not going back to Oakdale, and hypnotism—whatever quacks say—can only operate through the bodily senses of the operator and subject. Besides, Curson's influence over Miss Spencer is broken. He might as well try to mend an egg as recover it."

"Oh! I have not the least fear or thought about him now," Una assented; "he seems to have been pushed clear out of my mind by—" she hesitated, as Mr. Newman gave her a quick glance behind the back of the unconscious Miles, and she broke off, blushing furiously.

"Quite so!" he went on gravely, "we can let Mr. Curson—isn't that what you call him, Miles?—slide to the bottomless pit."

"Uncle Thorncroft is as bad," cried Miles hastily. Mr. Newman made no attempt to contradict him.

"Perhaps he's worse," he said, "but that's beside the question. He will take care of Miss Spencer for his own sake."

"I don't believe it. They will frighten and worry her to death. They have already nearly frightened and worried her to death with sham visions and all that kind of underhand trickery."

"Don't, Miles!" Una entreated on the verge of tears, "please don't talk in that wicked, reckless fashion of solemn things. It was a true vision I saw, as real to my eyes and ears as your face and voice are at this moment. It makes my blood cold even now to think of it."

"I told you so!" cried Miles triumphantly.

"What's that! what's that!" queried Mr. Newman impatiently, "what's that about ghosts and visions? You must tell me your ghost story, Miss Spencer, if you please!"

In a shuddering whisper Una told him the story of the ghostly visitation on the night of Mr. Bronder's funeral. His eyes twinkled as he listened, and a dry smile wrinkled his face like a withered apple.

"Oh! ah! very curious!" was his comment when the story was done. "I beg your pardon for a moment!"

He came back instantly with a polished mahogany box, carried tenderly in both hands. It was a two-foot cube with a big glass eye in its centre, and a big, lop-sided, trumpet-shaped ear on one side.

"This is my ghost-trap," he said, as he set it down gingerly on a table, with its cocked ear and staring eye turned full on Miles and Una; "'set a ghost to catch

a ghost,' you know. You shall carry it about as a watch-dog. Now, Miles, if I promise on the word of a man of science that the young lady will be troubled with no more visions at Oakdale will you give in ? "

"No!" answered Miles sturdily, ruffled by Mr. Newman's levity. "I don't trust my uncle; he means mischief."

"He wants to marry Miss Una to his handsome son Cyril, if you call that mischief!"

"D——n Cyril!" cried Miles angrily. "I beg your pardon, Una!"

"There is no need," Una answered audaciously.

"So that's all right," interrupted Mr. Newman. "On that point there's general agreement which doesn't sound like love or matrimony. But I want you to understand Mr. Thorncroft will take good care of the young lady for his son's sake."

"I don't trust him," Miles answered again doggedly as before; "why did he hide her and lie to us at Naples?"

"Because her life was threatened by a determined enemy. You heard him say so."

"I heard him, but I don't believe him."

"You said exactly the same thing yourself."

"I?"

"In your letter which he gave me. You saw Miss Una flung from the steamer—you don't call that the act of a friend!"

"I was mistaken," Miles persisted, "she tripped and fell."

"No! no!" Una interposed, "the woman threw me. I felt her stoop and lift me over the rails. She was strong as a man."

"But why! why!" Miles queried incredulously, "why should any one do such a hellish thing as that, especially a woman!"

"Especially a woman," echoed Mr. Newman. "The beauty that would make a man die to save her would make a woman die to drown her. Don't blush, Miss Una! I'm a withered old non-conductor, privileged to speak the truth. But Miles here is a good conductor of the tender passion. Half-a-million girls—more or less—watched and admired him in London. Perhaps one or two of the half-million——"

"Bosh!" interrupted Miles.

Una sat silent, frightened and stunned. As Mr. Newman rambled on there came back to her like a flash, the recollection of her meeting with that beautiful tiger-woman in the hotel in London. The scene had faded almost wholly from her memory. Curson's evil art had wholly absorbed her faculties in the journey across Italy. The exciting incidents that followed after her escape from his influence had concentrated her thoughts on the present. But now the thrilling scene came back to her, vivid and real in a lightning flash of memory. The woman was again before her

with deadly fury in her face and voice. She heard her claim Miles for her lover; for her husband. She thrilled again at the concentrated hate in her eyes as she whispered her parting threat.

Una knew now the woman lied when she called Miles her husband. But that the beautiful tiger-woman loved him she did not doubt, and would let nothing stand between her and her love.

Everything grew suddenly clear to her with that remembrance. The woman had seen them together on shipboard. It was she who had made pretence to stumble. It was she who had clutched her so fiercely with the strength of a strong man, and lifted and hurled her overboard. She shuddered again at the remembrance and hid her face in her hands.

These thoughts flashed through her mind swift as a dream in the second before waking. She uttered never a word.

But Miles and Mr. Newman saw her cheeks flush and pale, and her bosom heave tumultuously with the sudden and vivid fear. She seemed to wake with a little shuddering sigh to find their anxious questioning eyes fixed on her face.

"Mr. Newman is right, Miles," she faltered at last. "I have an enemy—a deadly, terrible enemy."

Mr. Newman's shrewd eyes were full of pity. "Jealousy is the motive?" he asked. "I'm right here too—am I not, Miss Spencer?"

She blushed, but did not answer.

Newman took her silence for assent.

But Miles fumed out in mingled wrath and love, "Have no fear, Una, we will protect you—Mr. Newman and I. You are safe with us. Surely you must feel now"—he turned appealingly to Mr. Newman—"she is safest with us?"

Mr. Newman fidgeted in his chair at this urgent appeal. It was Una answered—

"No! no! Miles. We—I mean I—am safer apart. Because she knows—that is, she thinks that—— Oh! don't look at me like that, I cannot explain now; some other time perhaps."

Mr. Newman caught her appealing eyes and answered by rising briskly from his seat.

"I must ask you two as a special favour to excuse me for a short time," he said, "I have important business. I will leave Miss Una to persuade you, Miles."

But in spite of his urgent business Mr. Newman found time before he passed out to stick a slender brass key into the entrails of his ghost-catcher and twist it. Instantly there was heard within the bowels of the box a faint buzz of delicate machinery like the hum of a far-off beehive.

CHAPTER XX

THE GHOST-CATCHER

MILES and Una sat shy and silent for a full minute after Mr. Newman left the room. She edged softly away from him, as far as the restraining arm of the couch would allow.

His heart beat so hard and fast it took his breath away; he could not have got a word out to save his life.

Of course it was the woman spoke first.

"Am I to congratulate you, Miles?" she whispered softly.

"Me! on what?"

"On your marriage. No, no! not an inch nearer just now; sit still and listen."

She plunged at once into the story of the strange woman at the Métropole hotel. Almost at the first sentence her gay humour vanished. As the memory of the scene came back with the telling, her voice sank to a frightened whisper. But all the time her eyes

were on Miles' face, and there was no mistaking his utter amazement.

"It's not true, Una; you are chaffing me," he said; "the thing is too utterly preposterous!"

"Chaffing! I am frightened to death!"

"You needn't then. The whole story is a lie—a stupid hoax. I know nothing of the woman; I never spoke to her, I never saw her. Surely you believe me, Una?"

"I believe in you, Miles; I don't think I ever doubted you. But I don't believe it's a hoax. The woman was in awful earnest; her eyes flamed with passion; she was a beautiful wild beast. She swore she would kill me and she meant it. It was the same woman that stumbled and clutched me on the steamer. Oh! I'm so frightened!"

Her voice rose and fell hysterically. Miles edged a little closer, this time without protest.

His love was almost absorbed in his pity. She was the child Una again for him, and he the big brother on whom she always relied for comfort and protection in the old days.

"Don't cry, darling," he begged, "don't cry! I cannot stand that. I'm sure you are mistaken about the woman. It couldn't be the same, you see."

"No! no!" she panted, "it was the same; I know it; I feel it!"

"Well, even if you are right," he went on soothingly,

"even if that she-devil did try to murder, it's all over now. Get some of your courage back; you used to have lots of it. You are quite safe with Mr. Newman and——"

He did not finish the sentence, but his strong arm stole protectingly round her waist, and he drew her to him unresisting. She let her head droop like a frightened child on his shoulder.

At the touch, love flowed and flamed through his veins, till he trembled with its force.

She felt the quiver in the strong arm that held her, and her heart beat quick in answer to the fervent pressure. She knew the madness her touch raised in him, and feared and trembled, yet rejoiced in it. All the woman in her went out to meet and share his rapture. She lay still in his arms, her fear wholly forgotten.

Then she raised her flushed and tear-stained face, and for a moment her eyes looked full in his.

She tried to speak, her voice died in a murmur. But her eyes had spoken.

"I love you, Una! I love you!" he cried passionately, as one pleading for life.

Still she did not speak, but her whole body seemed to yield to the pressure of his embrace.

"Answer me, Una!—give me a word of hope!"

Again their eyes met, and then their lips in the long first kiss of love which closes the happiness of a lifetime in a moment.

She drew herself apart, frightened at his vehemence and her own yielding, but tingling with rapturous joy even to her rosy finger-tips.

"Tell me in words you love me, Una!" cried the insistent, unsatisfied lover, "I cannot believe my happiness!"

"I love you!" she answered simply. All the poetry of the world is compressed in those three short words.

"We will never part again," he protested.

"Never is a long time, Miles," she answered, smiling faintly.

"Never! never! never!" he persisted. "I will not part with one minute of precious time."

"But you must, Miles; now don't look so shocked! One short year won't be so long passing."

"A short year!" he echoed, with dismal emphasis on the "short." "Can you be so cruel to me, Una?"

"To you and to myself, Miles. There! that will do—I promised, and I will keep my word."

"You are not bound by that promise; they cheated you into making it."

"I gave my word to Mr. Thorncroft, I would hate myself if I broke it. Would you break your word for me?—you needn't answer, sir, I know you wouldn't; I know you better than yourself. Besides—" Her face darkened again with sudden fear.

"Besides what, Una?" he asked anxiously, "that foolish vision?"

"It was no folly, Miles, it was terribly real. But I won't think of it. Our wise friend Mr. Newman laughed at it. He believes it was a delusion; I will try to believe it was a delusion, though I know in my heart it was nothing of the kind."

"He promised to prove it so, Una."

"I will wait for his proof. But no proof can contradict my own eyes and ears. The best thing is to try not to remember."

"I'm sure Newman is right; he's always right. It was not real, it was some trick on your sight or imagination."

"Well! well! the tiger-woman was real, at any rate. She is mad with jealousy. 'Mr. Newman is always right,' you say, and he knows her to be dangerous. When she finds she has failed in her first attempt, above all, when she finds us still together, she will try again and won't fail. I tell you, Miles, there's a devil in those big yellow eyes of hers. I am terrified at the bare thought. We must part till the mystery is cleared up, till the danger is over: for my sake?"

He hesitated. "You are frightened without cause, Una."

"'Newman is always right,' you have said it," she answered. "I will be safe in the cottage at Oakdale, I will feel safe, and you can come to see me sometimes—if you care to."

"But, Una, I will feel you are in danger ; something tells me there is danger there."

"Newman is always right."

"Oh ! blow Newman—don't tease a fellow. I am horribly in earnest and very miserable."

"So soon !" She made believe to pout, and gave him a look that sent his blood dancing. He moved closer.

"No ! no ! no ! not unless you promise ?"

"I'll promise anything you like."

"I mean until you say I'm quite right to go back to Oakdale."

"You are quite right."

"That won't do ; you must think it."

"I think it."

"Besides, you must——"

The last sentence never got finished.

A moment later Una leaped up from the couch, flushed and breathless.

"I am going out for a row," she said ; "I want the sunshine and open air for chaperons. You may come too—if you care to"—and he came.

The fair city, and the blue sky, and the shining waters beneath the gliding prow of their gondola were all glorified by love through all that happy day. There was no room in their overflowing hearts for care or fear.

Mr. Newman, however, spent the day discreetly in his own room busy with his ghost-catcher, which he carried off when they went out. At Una's earnest

request he joined them at a late dinner. It is to be feared that Miles' invitation to his old friend was not cordial. But Una sat beside him at table, and now and again by mere accident her left hand dropped listlessly by her side, and Miles had a chance to touch her slim warm fingers and was satisfied.

They sat late. The gliding sparks of the gondolas grew sparse on the canal, and the music faded out of the night air.

All the time Mr. Newman was in most excellent spirits. He was specially glad that Miles had consented to Una's return to Oakdale. "It will give us breathing space," he said; "we can hunt up that murderous termagant and pare her claws. Besides, it will hoodwink that old hawk, Thorncroft. Honestly, Miles, I think your amiable uncle is as bad as Murdock, and it would need the devil himself to complete that triumvirate. I'm more than ever convinced the will is a fraud."

"So am I," said Miles, "I never doubted it."

"But I saw your father read it and sign it," declared Una.

"That only proves what clever rogues they are, my dear," Newman interposed.

"I wish I could think so," sighed Una; "it would give me back my freedom. It is terrible to think of breaking the promise I gave your father, Miles, on his death-bed, though I did not know its meaning when

I gave it, though now I would rather die than keep it. Oh! if you could prove that his wishes were what I first thought them. But you cannot, you cannot! If it were so, why should he come back from the grave to warn me?" She shuddered at the remembrance.

"Oh! the vision," said Mr. Newman briskly, "that reminds me of my ghost-catcher. I have examined the trap, Miss Una; it's all right, I have caught two very nice ghosts indeed. If you like I can let them loose in this room; they are quite harmless."

No one likes being laughed at; Una didn't like it. Mr. Newman's levity jarred on her overstrung nerves.

"I'm in no mood for jesting," she said shortly; and Miles pressed the little limp, cold hand under the table, and glanced reproachfully at his friend.

But Mr. Newman was quite unabashed. "There is not the ghost of a jest about it," he said, "you'll see."

He had set his ghost-catcher on the sideboard. Suddenly, as he said the words "you'll see," he snapped off the electric light, and there was sudden darkness in the room—so black that Una uttered a little cry of fear.

"All ghosts love darkness," Mr. Newman explained—a mere voice in the pitch black of the room, "that's to tempt mine out, you know."

Una would have answered, but amazement held her silent; for suddenly from the great glass eye of the ghost-catcher there came a broad beam of pure dazzling

white light that struck and spread on the opposite wall. Softly, softly, under the intense strain of that pure white light, the wall seemed to melt away, and she saw, as in a mirror, the room in which she sat; the same, yet different, for there were flowers on the table where now the dessert and wine were scattered. Their places in the room were all changed. There was no one at the table. Mr. Newman stood at the open door, and she and Miles were seated on a couch.

The faint hum as of distant bees was heard, and the figures moved. Mr. Newman's coat tails vanished through the door which closed behind him. She and Miles edged a little apart. Then in the dead silence, dumb and dizzy with amazement, she heard a voice—she did not know it was her own—say soft and low :—

“ Am I to congratulate you, Miles ? ”

But she knew the bewildered voice of Miles that answered, “ Me ? On what ? ”

Still she sat still and dumb, and watched her other self in that strange vision that moved and spoke and answered. It was a weird sensation this living over again a scene that she thought had slipped away into the irrevocable past.

The vision was vivid as reality, every touch of colour, voice, and movement repeated to the life. Now her other self is telling another Miles the story of the meeting and threatening in the hotel in London, and

she sits still and silent, watching, listening, wondering at her own excitement in the dream.

Now her double has burst into tears, and Miles is soothing her. She hears the trembling tenderness in his voice; she sees his arms steal round her waist.

Then suddenly Una—the real Una—woke from stunned amazement to a clear remembrance of what followed, of what was trembling on the verge of repetition.

She leaped to her feet, alive, excited, her cheeks flaming with blushes.

"Stop it! stop it!" she cried passionately to Mr. Newman. "I will break it to pieces if you don't stop it!"

Mr. Newman laughed and touched his ghost-catcher. In an instant the voices and pictures went out together into utter silence and darkness. When the electric lamps leaped into light, the wall had closed in, the room was as before, and Una and Miles were gazing at each other, pale and wide-eyed with astonishment.

Again Mr. Newman laughed a triumphant chuckle.

"Murdock has a ghost-catcher too," he said, "but his ghosts are not as pleasant as mine. You must never again be frightened at your own shadow, Miss Una."

CHAPTER XXI

THE DEVIL MAKES A THIRD

MEANWHILE, Randal Thorncroft and Steven Curson were also in consultation.

The room in which they sat was bright with mirrors and gilding and pictures and porcelain. The gay sunshine streamed into the room. Close to their window, the gay gondolas glided, and more than one curious look was cast on the two men who talked so earnestly, oblivious of the outer world.

"She'll come back, Curson," Thorncroft said, "but you must go for the present at least. They suspect you, my good-looking friend, not wholly without reason."

"They have no fear of the respectable solicitor," rejoined Mr. Curson, with a grin that showed a row of teeth white and sharp-pointed as a dog's.

"No! why should they?" retorted Mr. Thorncroft, smiling grimly in response. "Besides, I mean no harm this time. I offer the silly girl a husband that any woman might be proud of, and a huge fortune into the bargain."

"It won't do," Curson said, edging his chair a little closer and speaking in a whisper; "the girl is in love with that booby cousin, and she's not one to change her mind."

"Cyril will change it for her," Mr. Thorncroft answered confidently; "there is no girl living that can resist Cyril if he gets a fair chance." So the hard, keen, shrewd man of the world spoke with the fatuous doting confidence of a fond mamma of her darling boy.

Curson grinned with contemptuous incredulity. His opinion of the superb Cyril was not an exalted one.

"Why not have done with the thing at once?" he said, speaking still in a whisper. "Should the girl chance to die, Cyril takes half the property instantly, and without encumbrance."

"And our esteemed friend Miles takes the other half as heir-at-law to his father," Thorncroft interposed. "The whole is greater than the half. Your mathematics might have taught you as much, Curson. Cyril takes the whole on his marriage with the girl. Your interest lies all that way; your share is doubled if he gets the whole. But even that's not my chief reason. Cyril loves the girl with a passionate love; I want him to settle down in happy married life at Oakdale."

Curson grinned again.

"You may laugh," Mr. Thorncroft went on angrily, "but it's true. The boy has played with the sex,

and who can blame him when they were so eager to be his playthings? But he is capable, none the less, of an intense and enduring passion. He loves this girl, he has sworn to me that he will kill himself if he loses her, and I believe him. I want him free from the toils of the beautiful she-devil I met in London. I want him to make a respectable marriage, and take his position as the first gentleman and far the richest in the county."

"If you can," said Mr. Curson, "but you cannot."

"Anyway, I mean to try. What's to hinder, except a foolish girl's passing whim?"

"Miles Bronder blocks the way, for one thing."

"What then?" Mr. Thorncroft looked him steadily in the eyes. There was dead silence in the room for a moment, and the faint echo of laughter was heard from a passing gondola that shot by in the sunshine over the shining water.

Mr. Curson's glance wavered and fell.

"I dare not!" he said.

"Dare not! there is no danger. The son might follow in his father's footsteps!"

"Aye! but there is that devil Newman to be considered now."

Mr. Thorncroft smiled contemptuously.

"That silly, self-conceited little cripple!"

Curson growled—the sullen growl of a wild beast cowed—half fear, half rage. "You don't know the

man. I do. He calls himself the greatest scientist in the world, and he is. I'm a child to him. Knowledge is power, and there is no limit to his knowledge. He has taken a fancy to Miles Bronder. He would track us both to the gallows if we hurt his pet booby."

"Well! well! we'll let that rest," said Thorncroft soothingly, for the big man was plainly frightened to death.

"So! and that brings us back to the girl," Curson whispered. "Newman can have no special interest in her!"

"I tell you again I won't have the girl touched—for the present, at any rate."

"For the future, then?" Curson grumbled. "It's well to be prepared. If she refuses point blank at the end of the year, as I believe she will, what then?"

"What's your plan?" retorted Thorncroft. "I can see you have some plan in the back of your head?"

"At Naples," said Curson, "I showed you I could send a voice through empty space to light where I will. Well, I can send death on the same journey. Where do you intend to lodge this girl?"

"In the cottage in the demesne," said Thorncroft, wondering at the question.

"About a mile from the house?"

Thorncroft nodded.

"Well, I can hide a little casket in the cottage—a very little casket—for the explosive is the most

powerful known to science. I can place an electric button in your room. There will be no connection between the two, but when you press the button the giant will awake in the casket and the girl will die. Experts will puzzle their foolish heads about the cause of the explosion. Newman may, perhaps, suspect the truth, but detection is impossible."

Thorncroft considered the devilish suggestion impassively, as he might consider some detail of a Chancery suit. "It could do no harm," he said, "to be prepared, but it would do no good. If anything happened to the girl, her share would go to my estimable nephew Miles."

"D——n Miles!"

"With all my heart, but there is a necessary preliminary. If Miles were dead, Cyril is his heir. Then when the girl dies or married, the whole property comes to him, and a full fourth from him by your deed to you, Curson, to work out your great discovery. It's worth a little risk, I should say."

Curson stirred uneasily in his seat.

Thorncroft went on smoothly, "Old Bronder went off peaceably, and the best doctors in London were in attendance."

"A pack of fools!" cried Curson angrily. "I tell you," his voice sank again to an impressive whisper, "if Adam Newman saw old Bronder before his death or after it, he could have told in five minutes how he died and who killed him."

"But there are other ways, surely?" Thorncroft persisted, seeing that his companion wavered between greed and fear,—"a lucky accident?"

"Perhaps," said Curson, wavering more and more.

"Some commonplace disease," hinted Mr. Thorncroft, "smallpox or fever? that's not beyond the resources of science?"

"Newman would cure him," said Curson. "Still I might—"

"Yes! yes!" There was a note of eagerness for the first time in Thorncroft's voice.

"I'll try," said Curson, with sudden inspiration; "I think I see a way. I'm not sure, but it is worth trying."

"It is a big reward," said Thorncroft.

"It is a big danger," retorted the other almost angrily, "but it is worth trying, and I'll try. How long do you intend to stay in Venice?"

"In less than a week I hope to return to Oakdale with the girl!"

"And the others—Newman and Miles?"

"They go back to London, I believe."

"Then I start to-morrow for Oakdale. I will pack up my library and my laboratory and make the necessary arrangements and go up to London. When you go back to Oakdale you will find a new electric bell-button in your room, but you must be careful not to touch it by mistake."

"And Miles?" asked Thorncroft.

"That's my secret," said the other restlessly, "I wish that job was well over."

"Amen!" said Thorncroft, in exactly the same tone as a formal church response. He never missed church on the Sabbath.

CHAPTER XXII

HELL HAS NO FURY LIKE A WOMAN SCORNED

NEXT day the terms of the treaty were settled between the high contracting parties. Una was to return to Oakdale for the seven months that would complete the year from Mr. Bronder's death. Mr. Thorncroft readily consented that Miles and Newman should see her whenever they chose. He even smiled as he gave the promise, for the thought passed through his mind, "What if I pressed that electric button of Curson's when they were all together and so settled the whole question!"

Mr. Curson started that same day for Oakdale. The others had arranged to leave Venice within a week, when an incident occurred that nearly closed the arrangements, and this strange story is an irretrievable tragedy.

The radiant Cyril went forth next morning to take his pleasure in Venice. He was dressed in faint blue flannels, perfectly cut; his white silk shirt was loosely tied at the collar with a rose-coloured ribbon, and

a broad snow-white Panama hat with a black band crowned his curls. As he passed across the sunshine of the great square, every female eye was turned on him admiringly.

But his eyes were fixed on the figure of a girl in front whom he had twice passed and re-passed in his stroll. Her face was closely veiled, but our exquisite lady-killer's fickle fancy was captured by the subtle grace of her figure.

As he passed her for the third time, her glove, by accident or design, dropped at his feet. Cyril was quick to take the chance the gods (or the girl) provided. She thanked him with a gracious bow without speaking, her hand touched his softly as she took the glove; the next moment she slipped through the open door of the Campanile, and vanished. He followed, just in time to get a glance of a neat foot and ankle at the turn of the winding slope that led to the top of the great tower.

It was the dead heat of noon, and the water glared and the hot air panted in the fierce sunshine. Inside the tower the atmosphere was like an oven. The heat seemed to strike through the thick walls. The place was empty of the customary trickle of visitors. The pair had the tower to themselves. Round and round; up and up went the light active Cyril in swift pursuit. But the girl was still more light and active, and only twice while they swiftly climbed did he catch sight of

a whisking skirt and a trim ankle vanishing round the curve.

At last the growing light told him they were near the top. In a moment more he emerged, eager, panting, on the summit.

The mysterious and illusive signorina was there, quietly waiting, no longer mysterious or illusive. Her veil was up, her face dazzlingly fair, cool and fresh, as if she had just come from her bath. Her ripe red lips and yellow-brown eyes smiled a welcome.

But Cyril stepped back in utter bewilderment. "Daisy!" was the only word he could get out in his amazement.

The mysterious and illusive signorina was his wife.

"At your old games, Cyril!" she cried gaily, shaking her glove at him—the glove she had dropped by accident. "But it's the girls' fault, you tell me, they won't leave you alone. Well, I won't quarrel with their taste, Curly, you do look splendiferous. What price matrimony?"

She stood before him in the sunshine, radiant in health and luxurious grace and beauty, challenging his admiration and love. Her warm glances fired his blood and he caught her to him and kissed her. She gave a soft low laugh of triumph, but put him aside gently.

"There! that will do for the present. I have a word or two to say to you first, young man."

Her eyes never left his face for a moment. A keener man than Cyril would have read the greedy look of passionate possession in them; such a look as a she-tiger turns on her cubs when danger threatens; but he only saw the smile on her face and smiled in answer. So he sat beside her in the careless caressing fashion which had so often pleased and teased her.

They were as much alone as in the desert of Sahara. Stretched far below them lay the city, asleep under the hot sun, with its network of shining canals and its spires and domes standing clear against the clear blue sky. There was no stir of life save that of the restless fluttering of pigeons' wings in the square below, and one black gondola that slid slowly out—a patch of darkness on the glowing surface of the smooth lagoon. Again he would have slipped his arm round her waist, but she still held him off.

"First tell me," she said, "am I your wife?"

"Of course! of course!" he answered lightly, "you know you are."

"Then where have you been—what have you been doing—why have you left me all this time by myself?" The playfulness she had assumed was yielding to the strain of passion; there was a kind of fierce eagerness in her voice and face.

"Jealous? Little woman," laughed Cyril, "that's something new!"

"I'm not jealous! I'm not jealous!" she repeated in

the same passionate whisper. "I don't mind you taking your pleasure as I take mine. But I love you all the time and you must love me. You are mine, Cyril, mine ; and I mean to hold you against the world. Do you hear ?"

"Of course I hear—I heard all that story before."

"It's a true story."

"True or false, it's not in the least amusing just now. Have sense, Daisy. Gather the rose-buds while we may, and all that kind of thing. You and I have met after a long absence."

"Whose fault is that ?"

"That's not the question. We have met ; you are looking tol-lol. 'Pon my soul, I never saw you looking prettier. Let us spend the day together ; laze about in one of those black boats, dine together, and—and—enjoy ourselves."

"I must know where I am first."

"Here on top of the Campanile with yours truly."

But she went on unheedingly, "Tell me where you've been, and what you have been doing since I saw you ?"

"It's a deuced long story and a deuced dull one."

"Then I'll tell it. You've been dangling after that pert Miss Prude. Of course I know it's her money you are after, still——"

"But it's not," interposed Cyril maliciously, "it's herself. Your pert Miss Prude, Daisy, is very pretty. You must confess that much."

"Pretty!"—with fine scorn; "I'd buy a prettier wax doll at the Lowther Arcade, that could open and shut its eyes!"

Cyril laughed and whistled—a low whistle of amusement.

Daisy flamed into sudden rage at the sound. "Oh! I have watched you," she cried, "when you thought you were alone. I saw you take her aside in the moonlight when the steamboat left Naples, and very sweetly the demure little minx went and sat with you, for all her affected virtue, though I had told her you were married to me."

"You are mad, Daisy! I assure you I never——"

"I'm not mad," she interrupted. "I don't mind your assurance of what I saw with my own eyes. I watched her go with you, I watched her leave you. Then she fell overboard, and I thought she was surely lost."

There was a note of challenge in her voice as she said the last words, but Cyril having no clue it passed unnoticed.

"She *fell* overboard," Daisy went on more slowly, "and I thought we were done with her. But she was saved somehow, and you followed her on here. I saw you together yesterday, and I made up my mind to end the thing once for all."

"Keep cool, Daisy!"

"I won't! I want a plain answer to a plain question.

Do you mean to divorce me to marry that woman, as your father threatened?"

He twirled his silky moustache.

"Answer me, I say! answer!" she cried.

"The gov. told you how the matter stands."

"Yes! yes! but do you mean to do what he said?"

"There is a million of money at stake."

"I didn't care if there were a hundred millions—do you mean to divorce me and marry this girl?"

"I must if you won't."

She quivered with passion, but she held herself in.
"And you love her better than me?"

"More questions?"

"Only this one more and I have done."

"Not the same way at all."

"Oh! I know what that means. The old cant about respect and virtue, and all the rest of that sickening rubbish. You want to make a kind of idol of that dull prim-faced wax doll, while I am only good enough to play with in spare moments. But why, Cyril?" she cried, her voice changed again to passionate entreaty. "Surely I'm as good to look at as she is. Men have been ready to sell their souls for a kiss from me, but I never cared for man but you. I'm a real woman with warm blood in my veins, and I love you as that milk-and-water miss could never love. I would die for you sooner than lose you!"

She was pitiful in the intensity of her passion and of

her humiliation as she fawned on him with all the seductive blandishments of the she-animal.

But Cyril was wholly unmoved. This strong, stormy passion had no meaning for him.

"Why make a scene, Daisy," he pleaded, "when the thing cannot be helped, and you know I hate scenes? Let us make the best of the present and let the future take care of itself."

"Never!" she whispered, with a sudden relapse into a wrath that was awful in the intensity of its still, white heat. "I'll never give you up. You have been nearer to death than you thought, Cyril; twice while you spoke I've been tempted to fling you down,"—Cyril came quietly in from the edge of the tower—"and to fling myself down with you. But there is a better way which I mean to try first. Of this be as sure as there is a God in heaven or a devil in hell, you will never marry another woman while I live." She turned from him as she spoke, and before he could answer went swiftly down the circling slope of the tower and vanished.

Left alone, Cyril felt a vague thrill of regret that she had left him, but he tilted the front of his Panama hat well over his face and lit a cigarette.

"Rum girl, Daisy!" was the total of his mental comment on the scene and the woman.

Next day a lady took up her residence at the hotel at which Miles and Una still stayed.

Two nights later, a little after midnight, the hotel was shaken by a sudden alarm of fire. The cry was raised by a lady, who rushed out screaming from her room on the third floor. The panic caught on more rapidly than the flames, and the struggling, screaming crowd poured out of the narrow doors.

The fire was sudden and strong. It rapidly mastered the place. The old wood caught and blazed like tinder. Red tongues of flame broke through the window, licked up the glass and spat it in scalding drops on the crowd below. The dark cloud of smoke that poured into the sky was shot with lurid flame, and the sparks flew like ten thousand bursting rockets.

All Venice crowded to the place by land and water. In the thickest of the crowd was Miles Bronder searching frantically for Una.

Suddenly a shrill voice is heard high over the tumult, crying, "Look! look! a woman!"

Then a wild howl of horror goes up from the vast multitude that shocked the night with tumult and drowned the angry roaring of the flames.

For there, high up in the blazing building, on an iron balcony that jutted over the water, a white-robed woman stood waving a white arm in frantic appeal.

Miles Bronder looked and knew her at a glance. His blood grew cold at the sight. He groaned out her name as a man in deep pain, and dashed madly through the crowd, struggling, leaping, flying over the close-

packed heads and shoulders. He has reached an old stone water-spout, grotesquely carved, that ran to the summit of the ancient palace. He grips it, mounts it, swiftly, lightly, safely, as the sailor runs up his mast. The stone is blistering hot, but he does not feel the heat. From point to point with the lithe agility of a cat he leaps and clings. The muscles of a man carry the weight of a child. The gazing crowd cheer the miracle in a frenzy of excitement.

The cheering suddenly ceases in the tenser excitement of dead silence. Eyes are strained and hearts forget to beat. He has climbed abreast of the balcony. He stands poised with one foot on the bald pate and one on the projecting chin of a grotesque gargoyle. But the balcony is full twenty feet away, and there is a sheer drop of fifty feet to the ground below.

At that awful moment the girl turned and saw and knew him at a glance, and guessed his desperate purpose.

"Back, Miles! go back!" she cried, and stretched out frantic arms to push him back from death.

The cry thrilled him with the fierce rapture of rescue. "I'm coming, Una!" he cried to her, "I'll save you yet!" For the fraction of a second he crouched with muscles drawn tense as a tiger's in act to spring; then he launched himself with one strong leap through the intervening space. It was not a leap but a flight, so lightly he passed. Like a bird he lights



"He lifted her with the strong flight of a bird into space."

and clings. His hands grip the wrought-iron work of the balcony, and he swings himself over the low rail beside her.

Only just in time! As she falls into his arms with a cry, the windows crackle behind him and a shooting tongue of flame touches the skirt of her white dressing-robe to scarlet.

"Courage, Una!" he whispered, "trust me!"

"I trust you, Miles," she answered.

He lifts her beside him to the broad stone ledge of the balcony. Above them, behind them, beneath them, the flames redden and roar. Far down below, the smooth waters of the canal are scarlet with the glare.

"Leap with me!" he whispered, his arm tight round her waist. "Now!"

He lifted her with the strong flight of a bird into space. They curved out over the crowd, trailing the flame of her blazing robe behind, and fell, hissing like a thunderbolt, into the dark waters of the canal.

They sank, but only as the buoy sinks when a huge wave beats it under, for a moment. The next, Miles was at the surface, swimming strongly with the unconscious Una in his arms, while women wept and fainted in their excitement, and cheer after cheer from the great multitude overwhelmed the roar of the flames.

Miles raised his precious burden to the willing hands that stretched from the deck of a gondola, climbed in

lightly after and carried her to a seat, while the boat shot swiftly across the water to the nearest hotel.

As consciousness returned he felt her shudder at the terrible remembrance, and then nestled closer to him like a frightened child.

"Miles!" she whispered, "it was murder. That awful woman again! I was caught in a death-trap. The door of my room was locked on the outside!"

CHAPTER XXIII

POISON MORE DEADLY THAN A MAD DOG'S TOOTH

MILES and Newman had settled down in their old house in London, but not to their old life. Miles was lonely, listless. He refused the most extravagant offers to appear in public, for his exploits in Naples and in Venice had got noised about London, and amongst managers no competition was keener than for the world-famous athleto. He might have counted his night's earnings by thousands of pounds. But he didn't want money, and he shrank from publicity and applause. He was full of the jealous fears and the gloomy forebodings of your true lover parted from his sweetheart.

Only the letters which came daily from Una made light spots in the dulness of his life. She was well and happy—so she wrote. Mr. Thorncroft was very kind, he visited her only at long intervals. “The exquisite Cyril comes to see me sometimes,” she wrote,—Miles worried his tawny moustache at this,—“radiant as the Prince Prettyman of a fairy tale. He is as daintily

spick and span as Dresden china. It is a pity they make those exquisite figures with their heads hollow"—at this Miles smiled, but still with unchristian desire to punch the hollow head of his cousin.

Then an incident occurred that led to other incidents that wholly broke the even tenor of their days.

Newman and he lived very quietly since their return. To avoid troublesome recognition, Miles let his beard grow and Newman had been at some pains to conceal their address.

It has been said that Miles gave no public exhibition of his strange powers. He made one exception to the rule. But it was wholly involuntary—one of the unpleasant incidents of his greatness.

It chanced that he had rashly ventured out one blowy day, and when the breeze heightened he could barely keep his feet. As he turned round a corner on to the Thames Embankment a sudden squall from the river caught and lifted him, and carried him through the air, to the utter amazement of the few straggling bystanders. The wind dropped him with a tremendous thud on a tall, gaunt man, and sent him staggering half-a-dozen yards along the path.

"I beg pardon!" poor Miles began, when he found his feet and his breath, but the man turning upon him with a scowl showed the malignant face of Steven Curson, and cut his apology off short with a curse.

Miles answered scowl for scowl. Then sailing swiftly

before the wind, with feet that barely touched the ground, he found a cab-stand and leaped into a hansom. When he looked back Curson had disappeared. But all the way home he had the curious notion that he was followed, and through the multifarious din of the traffic he fancied he could hear the rattle of a pursuing hansom.

As he fitted his latch-key to the lock, a hansom went swiftly by, and turning sharply at the sound he caught a glimpse of the gaunt, eager, evil face of Steven Curson at the window.

Adam Newman made no comment when Miles told him of the occurrence. But that evening he busied himself with some new electric complications in the passage in his bedroom, and cross-examined by Miles as to the meaning of the contrivance, he called it his patent rat-trap.

A few nights later Newman caught his rat. Tinkle, tinkle ! went a tiny bell close to his ear, and he knew that the street door was opened by some one to whom locks and bolts were no obstruction.

Newman leaped from his bed and pressed the button of a small portable electric lamp that stood beside him, and instantly flooded the room with light. There was not a sound in the hall or on the stairs, but he knew his watch-dog, electricity, had not lied. Hastily he huddled on the one essential garment, and thrust his feet into a pair of shoes that chanced to be convenient.

A happy chance for Adam Newman. Tinkle, tinkle ! came again out of the dead silence from a second little bell, as the door of Miles' room was softly opened.

Newman darkened his electric lantern and stole out noiselessly across the passage. A white streak showed Miles' door ajar. Like a cat he crept to it, and saw what he expected to see—Steven Curson prowling round the bed.

Newman's revolver was out instantly, cocked and levelled. He covered the big man through the slit of the door and waited. Curson's movements puzzled him. Unconscious of the muzzle of the revolver following his every movement, Curson stole softly round Miles' bed, with his body bent and his light close to the ground. A dozen times he stopped, and his right hand went from a paper he held in his left to the ground. It was like a wizard working some evil spell.

Then with a grim, self-satisfied smile on his face he stole back softly towards the door. It opened wide as he came, and Adam Newman, with steady revolver, stood at the opening, silently confronting him.

Curson started back with a low cry that seemed to be choked in his throat by the extremity of fear.

" Well !" said Newman very quietly, but his eyes were steady on Steven Curson's face, and his forefinger crooked on the trigger of the revolver. " What are you doing here, Murdock ? "

" No harm," Curson answered huskily.

"A likely story!"

"I am wholly unarmed; search me, if you like. I have not hurt your friend or tried to hurt him. I came from curiosity—scientific curiosity." The man's voice grew steadier. "You will understand. I wanted to find the secrets of your latest triumphs, to examine your laboratory in your absence. I feared you would not admit me. I was tempted to visit you uninvited, we were so long friends and colleagues. There was no crime in that." The words came slowly with effort in broken sentences. Fear was still heavy on the man.

"Bosh!" said Newman shortly, "you are no sentimentalist, Murdock. You were up to some mischief. What was it, I wonder?"

He passed his left hand lightly over Curson's pockets and clothes. There was no trace of a weapon.

"Poison perhaps!"

He took a couple of steps towards the water-bottle on the washhand-stand, and stopped, remembering that Curson had not gone near it.

As he came back by the bed something rumpled on the carpet under his foot. He stopped and picked up a carpet-tack, the sharp end broken off in the leather of his shoe.

Curson made a sudden movement towards the door.

"Stop!" hissed Newman, and the revolver was held out straight and steady.

Curson saw and stopped.

"Round there to the window!"—with the extended pistol barrel he beckoned him to the corner furthest from the door, and Curson slunk round like a cowed wild beast and crouched in the corner.

Newman held his electric lamp close to the carpet, and made a circuit of the bed as Curson had done. He picked up gingerly a dozen carpet-tacks, standing on their heads, their points filed sharp as needles. They were so arranged that any one leaving the bed must tread upon them with naked feet.

Twice, three times Newman went the circuit of the bed to make sure that no tack had escaped him.

Then he turned fiercely on the cowering Curson.

"Now I understand, you cruel devil! These things are poisoned. I am tempted to blow your brains out as you stand there shivering. Ha! you don't like death for yourself, though you are so free to kill. Go before me quietly; I won't have the boy wakened." He cast a kindly look towards the bed as he spoke. "You wished to see the laboratory again, you said. You shall. Go on, you know the way." So the big man crept down the stairs and the little man followed resolutely, the revolver held steady.

"Sit down!" said Newman, pointing to a huge, complicated arm-chair.

As Curson's weight pressed the seat, the chair gripped him, body, arms and legs, and held him secure as in a pillory.

The great room was brighter than day with electric light. Newman spread out his parcel of tacks on a white porcelain plate, and examined them, turning them gingerly with his forefinger, for he guessed that a prick meant death. Curson watched him with the sullen rage of a wild beast chained.

"What is it?" Newman asked at last. "Small-pox? Cholera? Blood-poisoning?"

Curson moistened his dry lips with his tongue-tip before he could get a word out.

"It is nothing," he said huskily, "a mere accident."

"What is the use of lying to me?" Newman asked scornfully, as he took up a big brass microscope and adjusted the lenses and mirrors.

For a moment he bent double to examine the fine point of the tack, which was like a pike-head under the glass, with a dull smear showing over the metal.

He started straight, as suddenly as a bow when the string is bent.

"Oh! you devil incarnate!" he cried, shaking a menacing fist at Curson, "it's the Wourali! I might have guessed it, I might have guessed—the deadliest of all. The savages beat the scientist in this. The Borgias themselves had no such poison. The deadliest of all, and you chose it to quench his young life. You cowardly brute! I've a great mind to—" The half-raised revolver completed the sentence. The small man was frantic with rage.

On Curson's livid face the cold sweat of terror stood like beads. His eyes were starting from his head; his lips moved but no sound came.

The little man put down his revolver.

"I won't cheat the hangman," he said quietly.

"They cannot hang me," Curson muttered with white lips. "You can prove nothing; there's no harm done."

"No thanks to you for that," Newman retorted. "But one murder is enough for a hanging, Kinard Murdock."

The man in the trap shuddered so that the great chair in whose embrace he sat shook with his shaking.

"Not that name," he whined, "I am not—"

"Kinard Murdock, murderer of his wife," Newman went on relentlessly, "sentenced to death two years ago. The man that killed the warder, broke prison and disappeared. They will be glad to have you back at Newgate; they'll take better care of you this time." Then with sudden passion that wholly overmastered him, "D——n you! you hound, had you not got enough of murder but you must thrust your neck a second time into the halter!"

"Have pity on me!" the coward whined again, in the very extremity of abject terror. "I was driven to it—his uncle, that devil Thorncroft, forced me!"

"Forced you!"

"Aye! forced me. I knew the danger, but it was

death to refuse. He too knew my secret as you knew it. He was solicitor for the prosecution. I was being quietly forgotten at Oakdale when he came down and knew me and broke up my life and made me his tool in all his own devilment. Curse him! curse him!"

There was no mistaking the earnestness of those curses. Whatever else was false in the man, assuredly he hated Thorncroft with a savage hatred.

CHAPTER XXIV

FOR LIFE OR DEATH

NEWMAN was silent for a moment, and Curson watched him in an agony of fear.

"Is that all?" he said at last; "has Thorncroft no other hold on you?"

"I will hide nothing from you. He has promised me money to carry on my good work."

"Ha! I thought so! the money of which Miles Bronder was plundered. How much?"

"A third of the share that comes to his son Cyril."

"And for this you concocted the fraudulent will?"

"No! no! as God will judge me—well as I hope for life I had no hand or part in the will. I will confess everything. I tried to mesmerise old Bronder and failed. Then Thorncroft said he could manage by himself, and he did. Bronder signed the will in his perfect senses. I saw him read and sign it."

"How was it managed?" Newman insisted. "You had best make a clean breast of it, Murdock."

"Not that name!"

"Any name you like—Curson if you like, but tell the whole truth for your own sake. How was the fraud worked?"

"I don't know, I swear I don't know!" the other protested, "I don't even know it was a fraud. I had a suspicion, but—"

"But what?"

"I was mistaken."

"Mistake or not, tell me everything. What did you suspect—why did you suspect?"

"Just after the will was signed I picked a paper from Thorncroft's pocket."

"Yes, yes; go on!"

"Thorncroft was frantic at losing it; he searched for it everywhere. I helped him to search for it. I told him that—"

"I don't care twopence what you told him; what was in the paper?"

"Nothing." Even in the extremity of his fear Curson felt a malicious pleasure in the disappointment he inflicted.

"Nothing! You had best not trifl with me, Murdock—you are playing with the halter!"

"Nothing of the least consequence, I mean. I'm telling you plain truth. It was a copy of a will in Thorncroft's handwriting, but it was neither signed nor witnessed: a mere piece of waste-paper."

"But it differed from the other will—the sham will?"

Newman asked ; there was a suppressed eagerness in his voice.

" Well, slightly," Curson answered, a sardonic smile struggling with the white terror in his face. " Just a word or two, but they were important words. The name of Miles Bronder was substituted for the name of Cyril Thorncroft."

" You have kept it ?" Newman grew more and more excited.

Curson watched him keenly from the depths of those sullen eyes, with a growing hope of escape. He felt the trap loosening.

" Yes," he answered, slowly weighing each word and calculating its effect. " Thorncroft seemed so frightened at the loss—so wild to recover the paper, that I kept it safe, hoping to find its meaning. But I failed."

" You have it still—where is it ?" The questions came in sharp jerks.

A sullen, obstinate look settled on Curson's face, covering up his terror.

" Yes, I have it still," he answered, after a long pause. " Where is it ? Well, that's my secret."

" I must have it," cried Newman impetuously, " I tell you I must have it !"

" You may have it on my terms."

" Oh !" The little man cooled as suddenly as he had heated. There was utter contempt in the glance he cast on his big prisoner, the glance of a man

for an ugly reptile. "Your terms! You mean your valuable life. Well, I don't mind if the paper is what I think it. I should like to hang you, Curson; the world would be the better for your hanging, but I am not so set on it that I would lose a chance like this."

"I will fetch it, then, if you let me."

Newman laughed, a curt, monosyllabic laugh of utter contempt. "I cannot trust you!"

"Can I trust you?"

"Certainly; you know you can," and he looked him squarely in the face till Curson's sullen eyes fell before his steady gaze.

"The paper is in the letter-case in my breast-pocket," he muttered sulkily. "You may take it out; I cannot."

In an instant Newman's eager, nimble fingers had the letter-case out, and the will on a single sheet of paper spread before him under the glare of the electric light.

From first to last it was in Thorncroft's neat, precise, peculiar, unmistakable and inimitable handwriting. But it struck Newman as peculiar that there were three blots of ink on it. One very large, just at the top, two small, but not less conspicuous, one right over the other, opposite the blank space where the signatures of testator and witnesses were lacking. Nothing could be more effective than these three blots for the instant identification of the document.

Newman read it twice over. Curson's description of its contents was absolutely accurate. The unsigned

will differed in a few words only from the signed will which Miles had read at Oakdale after his father's death. But those words were vital. It was Miles, not Cyril, that was to marry Una and share the property with her.

Newman muttered to himself disjointedly as he read. "I see it all now. This paper can have but one meaning. Such a simple trick and yet so cunning; a very clever and desperate rogue! No wonder the loss of the paper frightened him."

He raised his eyes from the paper and met Curson's fixed on him in the agonized appeal of mingled hope and fear.

"Yes!" he said, in contemptuous reply to that mute appeal. "You have saved your skin this time, but try no murderous tricks again, or, as there is a God in heaven, you shall hang! Now go!"

He touched a button, the circling arms of the chair flew apart, and Curson was free.

He staggered to his feet, swaying like a drunkard. The reaction that came with safety was even more demoralizing than fear. His face flushed and paled to livid lemon colour, and clammy sweat covered it. He made no movement to go, but stood stock-still, clutching the back of the chair hard to support his trembling bulk. .

Twice he moistened his dry lips with his tongue before he could get a word out.

"Newman!" he muttered at last in a hoarse whisper.

"Well! well! There is no more to be said. Remember my warning, and go!"

"But I want to stay. Take me back; you know I can help you! I will work as I never worked before. Take me back!"

Newman eyed him curiously and waited.

The other went on vehemently as a torrent that has broken its dam and must flow.

"You shall take me back. Thorncroft has promised me a vast fortune—a quarter of a million at least. I have his bond for it. He cannot escape. It will be all yours for our work."

"Our work?" Right well Newman knew the meaning of those wild and whirling words. "The old mad dream, Murdock," he said, and there was something almost of pity mixed with contempt in his voice. "You want to live for ever, and you think I can help you to make the wild dream reality!"

"It is no dream—it is no madness," Curson persisted passionately, "and you know it, Newman; and you can help if you will. You can conquer death if you will. You have mastered all the secrets of the human body. You can ensure it against disease and destruction. Do it! do it! for your own sake, do it! Has death—horrible blank annihilation—no terrors for you?"

"Death is the beginning of life," Newman answered gravely, "of a greater, a wider life!"

"It is false ! it is false !" Curson cried. "The idle jargon of priests who live by it, and their foolish dupes who long for it, and whose longing forces their faith. In your heart, Newman, you know it is false. Each fool fashions his own heaven and wastes his life on this earth—the only life he has or can have—in striving after the vain dream. When we die we die for ever ; the chemical elements of our bodies go back to the earth and the air and the water, mere dead matter, as dead as the matter they join. You know it, Newman, none better than you, and the mind—the warm conscious essence of life that makes us think and feel and know we live—vanishes utterly and for ever. It lives in the body and by the body. It has and can have no separate existence."

His vehemence, his abject terror for the moment, made Newman forget his loathing of the man.

"Do not shut your soul against the assurance of immortality," he began.

"It is a lie ! a lie !" cried the other passionately, "a blundering, palpable lie ! Don't you think I would believe it if I could ? I long to believe it ! Oh ! how I have longed for faith ! I want to live. I don't fear damnation, I don't fear the hell fire the fools talk of, but death, the blotting out of life, sends a cold shiver to my heart. I almost died at the bare terror of death just now."

He paused in a very paroxysm of something worse

than terror—an awful shrinking, loathing repulsion of death.

"Why prattle to me of life after death?" he began again fiercely; "why give the lie to our own senses and reason? A corpse doesn't live. There can be no life without a living body. We cannot see without eyes or hear without ears or think without brains. We are but animals like the others, we live like the animals, drinking and eating and sleeping to keep our life going, and we die like them utterly. Life in this world is the only possible life. It is the only life I know—the only life I want. Help me to that—and you can if you will—and I will be your slave."

He fell at Newman's feet—this man who had never knelt to God—in an abject passion of entreaty.

There is a power in the extremity of passion, no matter how abject, to grip men's souls. Newman felt that power as he looked down at the cowering and shivering figure at his feet, and pity for the man's agony almost conquered repulsion.

Then in an instant came to him a remembrance and a revelation of the selfishness and savagery of this creature that grovelled at his feet for life. In the evil nature of this man there was no other thought but self. He clung to life with a desperate tenacity. He shrank from death in a very agony of loathing. Yet the lives of other men counted with him as nothing. Not an hour ago he had been caught in the act of killing.

Newman shivered with revulsion at the remembrance. He pushed the prostrate figure from him with his foot.
"Get up!" he said.

At the mere sound of his voice all hope of his aid died out of Curson's heart. He rose and stood facing him sullenly. His eyes fell before the wrath and scorn in Newman's gaze. The small deformed man seemed to take on a sudden dignity that came with the consciousness of power.

"Oh! you coward!" he said, "you brutal, murderous, cringing coward! Give you new life! tax nature to prolong your evil days on earth! I would die first! It grieves me to the heart that I cannot send you straight to the shameful death you have earned. I pledged my word too rashly. So you would buy my power with gold? How did you earn that money"—Curson winced—"you offered me? Ah! I can guess, I can guess. Now listen to me. I let you go free, as I promised. Live your life as you choose, spend the wages of your past crimes as you may, drag out your miserable days with the terror of the inevitable death ever before you; but remember to keep clear of fresh crimes. My eyes see far and my hands reach long. The next attempt means your own death. Now go!"

Without a word the cowed and trembling wretch shrunk from the room.

CHAPTER XXV

AN INNOCENT FORGERY

FOR an hour longer Newman sat pondering over the paper Curson had given him. He guessed the trick that Thorncroft had played. But he felt it was impossible to expose it—the unsigned paper showed nothing. Thorncroft need but say the draft had been made by him in the hope of inducing Bronder to sign it. The world would applaud his disinterested magnanimity in the attempt. But the document with the signatures was the will. Newman felt he must meet guile with guile. But how? how? The insistent, persistent question made his brain dizzy.

Every moment some scheme loomed before him—vague, intangible as a ghost—eluding the quick grasp of his intellect. He strained his mind, as a man strains his eyes to read blurred writing, strains his ears to hear faint sounds, but still in vain.

Then all at once without effort there came to him, as it were from outside himself, a plan, simple and tangible, complete in all detail. He leaped from his

chair in his excitement, and paced the room rapidly as the details grew more and more distinct.

When he turned into bed in grey dawn it was sketched out clear as a map in his brain.

Next morning he was with Miles at early breakfast, for Adam Newman could when occasion demanded dispense almost wholly with sleep.

To Miles he was more than ever affectionate in his manner, from the remembrance of the imminent peril of the night before.

"Slept well?" he asked, with a quick glance from under his bushy eyebrows, while he tapped a new-laid egg carelessly with a spoon.

And Miles—his mouth half-full of broiled kidney—answered almost in the word of Jack the Giant Killer in the fairy tale.

"Well, I thought I heard mice stealing softly about the room in the night. It was imagination, of course, for there are no mice."

But Newman did not tell him how close death had come to him on those soft footsteps.

"Miles!" he said after a long pause, "have you got any letters of your father's?"

"Lots!" Miles answered, "I always kept his letters; I always will. They are full of affection. When I read them I am more and more convinced that the will is a fraud."

"So am I," said Mr. Newman, "though it may be

impossible to prove it so. What was the last letter you had from him ? ”

“ A week before his death,” said Miles. “ But why ? ”

“ Easy a moment—can you lend me that letter for a day or two ? ”

“ Certainly. I need not ask you to take good care of it. But——”

“ The witnesses to the will,” Newman went on smoothly,—“ you knew them both I think, and liked and trusted them, and like and trust them still ? ”

“ Oh ! they were no parties to the fraud, if that’s what you are driving at.”

“ That’s not what I’m driving at. Had you ever any letters from them ? ” There was an eagerness in Newman’s voice that startled and bewildered Miles.

“ I cannot understand——” he began.

“ Then don’t mind understanding,” Newman cut him short, “ but answer me like a good boy.”

“ I don’t remember; I cannot say. Oh ! yes, I had letters from them at the time of my father’s death.”

“ Just the time I want. From both ? ”

“ Yes, from both.”

“ And you kept them ? ”

“ Yes, they were all in praise of my father.”

“ I want the loan of two of those letters, Miles ; one of each.”

“ You can have them, of course. Is that all ? ” Miles was a little ruffled at Newman’s reticence.

"Not quite, but very nearly. You read the will through?"

He nodded gloomily.

"And remember it?"

He nodded again. "I am not at all likely to forget."

"Can you tell me which name was first—of the witnesses, I mean?"

"I cannot see what difference it makes, but I can tell you if you want to know—Lord Morton's."

"One question more and the cross-examination is over. Bear with me, Miles, and believe me the questions are not as silly and purposeless as they may seem. There is a motive behind."

"Of course I believe it," Miles answered, ashamed of his sudden spasm of impatience. "Fire away as long as you like; I'll tell you anything I can."

"I have only one question. Did the witnesses, or either of them, read the will?"

"No!" Miles answered decisively. "They were as surprised as myself when Mr. Thorncroft took it from the sealed envelope and read it aloud. Then Mr. Thorncroft handed it to me to read, and when I handed it back he put it in the envelope again. I think Sir Percival glanced at the signatures when Mr. Thorncroft took the will from the envelope; I'm not quite sure of that. But I am sure that neither he nor Lord Morton read the will."

"That's all right!" commented Newman cheerily,

with a sigh of relief ; " I think I see my way clear. When can you let me have the three letters ? "

" In a minute and a half ; they are up-stairs ! "

Miles and Newman spent the day together on the river and saw the *Hamlet* of the century in the theatre. Newman in the front stalls snap-shotted him in the ghost scene with a camera which he carried on his watch-chain. The resultant picture, enlarged life-size, is still preserved in the British Museum for the instruction of future generations of actors. But neither during the day nor the evening was there one word more between them about letters or will.

That night, however, when Miles was in the dreamless slumber of health and youth, Newman stole softly down to his laboratory.

He had with him the three letters he had got from Miles in the morning, and he sat for some time at a glass-topped table under the white glare of the electric light, examining the signatures with the minutest care.

" Common blue-black ink ! " he muttered to himself, " and a soft steel pen ; all three of them. There is no trouble there."

The glass-topped table was a show-case full of rare shells. He raised the lid and bundled the specimens out unceremoniously on the floor.

Then he took an electric light of special power, his own invention, set it inside the case and closed the lid.

Over the glass he spread smoothly Wilfred Bronder's last loving letter to his son, and over the letter the draft will he had received from Curson. Very carefully he adjusted the two in such a way that the blank space of the will, where Bronder's name should have been written, exactly covered the signature to the letter. Then smoothing both flat with the palm of his hand he pressed the knob of the electric light and there was black, palpable darkness in the room.

He pressed a second knob and the small lamp inside the case glowed so brightly through glass and paper that it lit the entire room.

On the blank space of the will the signature of Wilfred Bronder appeared as distinct as on the letter.

Newman sat at the table on which pen and ink were already set, held the double paper steady with his left hand, and with his right swiftly and dexterously traced the signature over the lines on the blank spaces of the will.

Then the lamp in the case was extinguished and the lamps in the room re-lit. With the minutest care—first with the naked eye and then with a magnifying glass—he compared the forged signature on the will with the genuine signature on the letter. Line for line, curve for curve, light stroke and heavy stroke, they were absolutely identical. The keenest expert could have found no difference.

Twice he repeated the process with the other two

letters, beginning with Lord Morton's. His examination of the forged signatures of the witnesses were, if possible, even more careful. This over he re-lit the light in the case and re-toasted a letter in Sir Percival Foreman's name that seemed a shade lighter than the original.

Then he withdrew the electric lamp from the showcase and replaced the specimens with his customary methodical precision, and sat for a while gazing at his handiwork with pardonable pride.

It was a perfectly successful forgery—of testator's signature and of witnesses'.

"If I am right in my guess," he said, "and I know I am right, this will is, with the exception of those half-dozen vital words, a perfect facsimile of the will which gives the property of Miles' father to Randal Thorncroft's son. At the first glance that shrewd devil old Thorncroft himself might mistake it. The stupid world would call this a forgery. But it is the paper with the genuine signature of the testator and witnesses that is forged, and this with the forged names is the true will. On that point at least my conscience is quite easy, and I hope to get judge and jury to agree with me."

He locked the forged true will in a safe, quenched the electric lights, stole back to his bed, and slept the sleep of the just, quite undisturbed by the thought that he had just committed a crime for which seven years' penal servitude was the lightest penalty.

CHAPTER XXVI

RECONNOITRING

RANDAL THORNCROFT chuckled grimly when he received in his chambers at Lincoln Inn Fields a notice of a suit on behalf of Miles Bronder to prove in solemn form the will of Wilfred Bronder his father deceased.

"The fools!" he said to himself as he directed the caveat to be served, "the dull fools to run their heads against that stone wall. Do they hope to make liars of Lord Morton and Sir Percival Foreman and get a judge and jury to believe and help them?"

"That fellow Newman is an ass," he soliloquized, "after all, for this is his doing, I take it. It's a forgery, of course. Miles must know it's a forgery, for he read the will and heard Lord Morton and Sir Percival acknowledge their signatures. Besides, Una, no doubt, told him she saw it signed and witnessed. They are playing straight into my hands. Here is an easy way of getting shut of the young booby, since that craven Curson is so absurdly frightened of that

crooked little idol he worships, and refuses to further help me. A conviction for forgery, and seven years' penal servitude would serve all purposes. It might even serve to bring the love-sick girl to her senses if she saw her hero decorated with the broad arrow. Perhaps, on the whole, it's even a better way out than——”

He did not finish the sentence. His thoughts trailed off into the details of the preparations for the coming contest and the exposure of the fraud. He had even a pleasant vision in the remoter distance of Miles and Newman in the dock together charged with forgery, and heard the jury's verdict and the judge's sentence with grim delight.

For Mr. Thorncroft had imagination—of a sort.

He was certainly quite right in his guess that Newman was at the bottom of the business, and Miles a mere instrument in his hands. But he was wrong in thinking that Miles knew that the will propounded on his behalf was a forgery. Newman had seriously considered how much of his secret it would be safe to tell Miles, and arrived at the conclusion it would be safest of all to tell him nothing.

“Pull yourself together, my boy,” he said to him at breakfast the morning following the forgery, “I've a bit of startling news for you. No, not bad news,” for Miles' thoughts flew instantly to Una's side with a sudden presentiment of evil.

"Don't look pale and glare at me like that! I have laid my hands at last on what I believe to be your father's true will; read it!" and he handed him the ingenious forgery across the table.

Miles looked at it and read the first half-dozen lines.

"Why, it is the will I read in Oakdale," he said, "in uncle's handwriting. How did you lay hold of it?"

"Read on," answered Newman dryly, "to the end."

Miles read it over in silence, and then turned back to one special passage and read it again as if he could scarcely believe his own eyes.

He could hardly speak from excitement and amazement. His words stumbled over each other in a confused jumble.

"It's the exact same!" he stammered out, "the same in every particular, except that I am to marry Una, not Cyril. Oh! I knew I was right, I knew that was what he meant from the first."

It was characteristic that he never noticed at all the change in the disposal of the property. Una was his sole thought. Love and duty ran together; at last his faith in his dead father was vindicated. Again he examined the will curiously, from the first word to the signature. He looked up to Newman—delighted, but puzzled as well.

"Strange!" he said, "the two are so like, even to the blots."

"Not strange at all, to my thinking," Newman answered dryly.

"Both are in my uncle's handwriting; both have the same witnesses; even the wording is the same, only Cyril's name is changed for mine."

"That's the whole difference," Newman assented.

"And quite enough," Miles answered, smiling.

Then remembrance smote him with sudden fear. "But this cannot be the true will; I had the will in my hand in Oakdale and read it through. Uncle took it from a sealed envelope. Una told me she saw it signed. It had my father's name to it like this, and the witnesses like this, but——"

"This is the true will," Mr. Newman interposed decisively.

"But I cannot in the least understand how——"

"Then don't mind understanding; take my word for it."

"All right, I will—but how, in God's name, did you lay hold of it?"

Taken by surprise by the sudden question, Newman blurted out a half-truth that he had intended to keep to himself, "Curson gave it to me."

"Curson!" Miles cried out in astonishment; "then my uncle knows of its existence!"

Newman smiled. "Yes, he knows of its existence. He wrote it himself, as you see, all but the signatures. But then he didn't know Curson had it; he doesn't

know I have it. He will protest it is a forgery ; he will give us a run for our money in the law courts. It will be a tough fight, Miles, for your uncle is a dogged and a wily fighter. Are you content to leave the plan of campaign in my hands ?"

" Of course," Miles assented cheerfully ; " it is enough for me to know that this is my father's true will, with his own name, written with his own hand at the close of it. We're sure to win."

" Yes," echoed Newman, " it is unquestionably his true will, and I think we are sure to win."

He made no allusion to the writing of the testator's "own name with his own hand," nor did Miles notice the omission.

The man of science transformed himself without an effort into a man of business and of law. The solicitor he selected was dull, honest, respectable, obedient. It was the last quality that secured his selection.

Quite unobtrusively Newman directed the case while seeming only to advise.

The laboratory was deserted for the lawyer's chambers and the law courts. The wonderfully alert, astute instinct of the man rapidly caught up the tricks of the new trade, and he flung himself into the struggle with the same determination, the same confidence and delight with which he had fought out many a victorious battle with Nature for her secrets.

The selection of the leading counsel in the case was

his, though the solicitor marked the name and big fee on the brief.

The public always wondered how a man so dull, so confused, so incapable of sequent, or even grammatical speech as Mr. Silas Yorke, K.C., had ever attained a leading position in his profession. They contrasted him with his keen, brilliant, eloquent rival, Lucius Shaw, K.C., whose retorts were so quick, whose jokes so witty, and whose speeches were masterpieces of elegant and eloquent diction.

The difference between them was summed up by the aphorism of a chronic special juror, who declared that Yorke seemed always to be making the worst of a good case, and Shaw the best of a bad one. Mr. Yorke, K.C., laughed good-humouredly when the epigram was reported to him, and seemed to take it as a compliment. It certainly was a strange coincidence that while the versatile Shaw made the brilliant speeches, the dull Yorke got the verdicts.

Newman heard both men in the Courts and promptly made his selection between them, so Yorke led for the plaintiff in the great case, "*Bronder v. Thorncroft*," and Shaw for the defendant.

Newman's inspiration was in every line of the brief that was furnished to the leader. That brief at first rather puzzled Mr. Yorke. It was so meagre in facts, so full of hints and suggestions; in fact, such an intrusion on his own special province as leader, as he did not

expect from the submissive Mr. Pounder, that it roused the eminent King's Counsel to the nearest approach to surprise and curiosity of which his placid intellect was capable.

There was a consultation, and by a straining of professional etiquette, Mr. Newman—as representing the plaintiff—was allowed to be present.

In his own confused way Mr. Yorke, K.C., explained his difficulties, repeating the same thing over several times, but getting his point clear at the end.

It was his duty, he said, to direct the proofs at the trial and the general conduct of the case, but the brief gave him no materials for that direction. It was in no sense a summary of the evidence available for the plaintiff, but was rather a series of suggestions, if not directions, for the conduct of the case. "In fact," said Mr. Yorke in conclusion, "I am required to sail under sealed orders, which I am only to open when I find myself in Court."

He was rather proud, apparently, of this mixed metaphor, which he repeated half-a-dozen times in the course of his rambling discourse.

Mr. Pounder, who had no excuse or explanation to offer, sheltered himself instinctively behind Mr. Newman.

Mr. Newman's explanation was no less diffuse than Mr. Yorke's complaint.

To Mr. Pounder and the junior counsel in the case it

seemed wholly irrelevant, even pernicious. They were aghast when he insisted on the evidence of the execution of the will which they contested. They yawned while he dwelt in wearisome detail on the almost absolute identity, even down to the ink-blots, between the will which Mr. Thorncroft held and the will which they propounded. But Mr. Yorke listened throughout with exemplary patience and attention. His enemies declared that Mr. Yorke had a face like a gold-fish. In the blunt nose, the scant, reddish-white hair brushed smooth and plastered close to his head, and in the light-coloured, prominent, wholly expressionless eyes, there was a certain justification for this calumny.

He never looked more fish-like than at the close of Mr. Newman's explanation.

Did he catch a glimpse of the truth which Newman let peep from the veil, with those protruding, expressionless eyes of his? Did he guess, as Mr. Newman had guessed, the simple, ingenious device of Mr. Thorncroft—the more ingenious for its simplicity? Did he divine the counterplot of Newman? Did he realize that it was criminal forgery which he—the eminently respectable King's Counsel—was expected to urge on the acceptance of a judge and jury?

It is impossible to say. His face was as impassive as a gold-fish, and he offered no comment and he asked no questions when Mr. Newman had ended his rambling explanation. But Mr. Yorke made no

further objection to the contents or character of his brief.

They had several further consultations after that, and the eminent leader always listened with impassive attention to all that Newman had to say, and almost always stolidly concurred in Mr. Newman's views of the conduct of the case.

Still, when Mr. Pounder on one occasion suggested off his own bat that the leader should have a private interview with Mr. Newman, who had completely bewildered the solicitor, Mr. Yorke politely but firmly refused. "We must conduct business in the regular way, my dear Pounder," he said, "in the formal, regular way. A barrister is bound to do his best for his client—that is his whole responsibility,—outside that, the whims or fancies, action or conduct of his client's partisans are absolutely no concern of his. We have no secrets in this case, absolutely none. Mr. Newman is a little eccentric perhaps—your scientists generally are. It is right to add he is, so far as I know, a very respectable gentleman."

Mr. Newman chuckled hugely when he heard the terms of the refusal.

"It's all right!" he said, clapping the discomfited Mr. Pounder on the shoulder, "that means that he understands the case right down to the bottom. There is now nothing that I can tell him."

At the second last consultation, however, the learned

King's Counsel did not disdain to take a hint from the scientist.

They had met in the leader's house in a bare, narrow room with sparse "common-form" furniture, met to settle what witnesses should be summoned. Mr. Pounder opined that "the plaintiff should be called, of course."

"Certainly, the plaintiff," said Mr. Duff the junior counsel, thinking he was quite safe in that approval, and he scribbled a note with blue pencil on the fold of his brief.

Mr. Yorke let his expressionless eyes rest for one moment on Mr. Newman's face.

"No!" he said gently but very decisively to his junior, "we won't require the evidence of the plaintiff. You see he wasn't present at the making or signing or witnessing of our will. I'm right in that, I think, Mr. Newman?"

Mr. Newman nodded assent. "Indeed," Mr. Yorke went on, turning again to Mr. Pounder, "it would be better if the plaintiff was not in Court on the occasion of the trial. Young men are so excitable and so impetuous."

"I'll see to that, Mr. Yorke," said Mr. Newman.

"Thank you, Mr. Newman," said Mr. Yorke; "you're very kind."

"You will want to summon the witnesses to the will, at any rate," Mr. Pounder ventured again, believing himself quite sure of his ground this time.

Mr. Yorke stroked a narrow chin and a starved beard with a bony right hand dubiously.

"If I might offer a suggestion," Mr. Newman interposed modestly, "we can trust that to the other side. They will be sure to have those two witnesses in Court for their own purposes. It will be more effective if we call them out of the enemy's camp."

Again Mr. Yorke's eyes met his as expressionless as a boiled cod's.

"We will take them by surprise," Mr. Newman continued.

"Yes," Mr. Yorke stolidly assented, "we will take them by surprise."

The notion of the formal, slow-paced Mr. Yorke taking any one by surprise seemed too absurd for ridicule.

"You need not subpoena Lord Morton or Sir Percival Foreman," he added soberly to Mr. Pounder.

"Are we to produce no witnesses at all, sir?" remonstrated Mr. Pounder.

"We might subpoena Mr. Thorncroft himself—perhaps, it will puzzle him as to the nature of our case," Mr. Newman suggested, "and Mr. Curson and the doctor who attended Mr. Bronder, and some of the servants in the house; it really doesn't matter which, as it is possible we may not have to examine them."

"Yes," said Mr. Yorke, with the wan ghost of a smile and the vague droop of an eyelid over an expressionless

eye, "I think it will puzzle him to tell the meaning of it."

"It puzzles me to tell the meaning of it," protested Mr. Pounder angrily to Mr. Newman as they walked home together from the consultation, "there is no meaning in it. I like a case conducted in the regular fashion. Why did you insist on retaining this thick-witted, muddy-pated man when there was a leader like Shaw, as keen as a razor, to be had for the same fee?"

Mr. Newman's upper lip wrinkled with a dry smile. "I was never better pleased with my choice," he said slowly; "Mr. Yorke is an extraordinary man."

"An extraordinary ass!" commented Mr. Pounder testily.

"Well, yes, if you choose to put it that way; an extraordinary ass—very extraordinary!"

CHAPTER XXVII

A VIGILANT EAVESDROPPER

LATER on Mr. Thorncroft came up to London to the Hôtel Métropole to personally conduct the campaign for the defence. Mr. Newman also moved into the Métropole, so the opposing commanders were under the same roof and even on the same floor, though at the extreme ends of the long corridor.

The morning but one after Mr. Newman's arrival it chanced that a workman came down the long corridor between the two sets of apartments. He was a low-sized man, in coarse tweed, with a high, bald head thinly thatched in a wide circle with scant, sandy hair. A thick sandy beard and whiskers occupied three-quarters of the entire area of his face. In one hand he carried a coil of electric insulated wire, together with certain borers and pincers used in his trade; in the other a square mahogany box from which there projected a hollow cone, shaped like the mouth of a huge blunderbuss. There was a light step-ladder slung over his arm.

The man stopped and knocked at the door of Mr. Thorncroft's sitting-room.

"Come in!" cried Mr. Thorncroft testily, looking up over his shoulder from the desk where he was writing at the far end of the room. "Well! what do you want?"

"Come to repair the wires of your telephone, sir."

"Take as little time and make as little noise as you can about it, my man," said Mr. Thorncroft, resuming his writing.

"It's a five-minutes' job, sir," the man answered respectfully, and set silently, swiftly and skilfully to work.

There was a tall book-case near the door. The wire of the telephone ran up the side and along the top of the book-case and so out into the corridor through the framework of the door. The man set his ladder close to the book-case, and climbed to the top. He bored a new hole through the wooden framework, passed a new wire through, letting the coil fall in the corridor outside. Then he came down and shouldered his ladder.

"Good-morning, sir!"

"Oh! good-morning," snapped Mr. Thorncroft, looking up for a second from his work, and the workman went out, closing the door softly after him.

Mr. Thorncroft did not notice then nor afterwards that he had left his mahogany box perched on the top of the book-case, with the bell-shaped snout flush with the cornice of the case and invisible from below.

The workman went slowly back along the corridor, carrying the coil in his hand and pinning the wire as he went along the wainscoting. Every one that came or went saw him at his work. There was no concealment nor attempt at concealment. Towards the far end of the corridor he stopped at Mr. Newman's door, pierced a hole through the framework and passed the end of the wire through. Then he knocked, went in—and never came out.

Having locked the door behind him, he pulled off the bald-pated wig and huge bushy whiskers and thrust them into the bag from which he had taken them. Then he rapidly changed into his own clothes, and was Mr. Adam Newman, once more smiling and well-pleased and self-complacent with his morning's work. For he had left behind him in Thorncroft's room a vigilant eavesdropper in the shape of the most improved and powerful electrophone yet invented.

He drew the wire into his room and fastened it to a receiver he had already fixed in the wall. Instantly a faint scratchy sound was heard as if of a mouse in the wainscoting. It was Mr. Thorncroft's pen flying over the paper, fifty yards away—with at least two dozen walls between. Newman put the receiver to his ear, the scratching grew loud as an impatient dog at the door. He heard Mr. Thorncroft turn the leaves, he heard him dip his pen in the ink-bottle with a clink of steel against glass. He fancied he heard his breathing.

Presently Mr. Thorncroft stood up from his desk, pushing the papers aside with a loud, rustling sound, locked the desk with a snap like the clang of a prison bolt, and came out on the corridor.

Mr. Newman put down the receiver with a beautiful smile of contentment. He had not the very faintest scruple as to the character of his ruse.

"The man Thorncroft is a swindler and a would-be murderer," he argued to himself, if it can be called argument when he felt no doubt, "a human wild beast; the more dangerous for his cunning. In a fight to the death with such a man I'll throw away no chance. Any trap is good enough that catches vermin, I'll bait them all."

Many useful scraps of information did Newman's unsleeping, vigilant spy in the enemy's camp convey to him, to be used effectively in the conduct of the case. Even the unimpressionable Mr. Silas Yorke once expressed mild surprise at his foresight. But only once, it is fair to add; after that the discreet counsel took the hints he got silently and used them.

CHAPTER XXVIII

UNCONSCIOUS PERJURY

AFTER many preliminary skirmishes of motion and counter-motion which constitute the scouting in the forensic campaign, the pitched battle of the trial came at last. All London was agog with excitement. The vast fortune involved, the strange tenor of the wills; but above all, the fact that "The Wonder of the World"—the universal athletic record-breaker—was the chief person concerned, had raised popular excitement to fever-heat.

ON the day of the trial the court was as full as it could hold and fuller. The junior Bar availed themselves to the full of the privilege of their costume to crowd the body of the court with black stuff and white horsehair. Indeed, there was a story current of one audacious young lady, who, failing all other means of admission, had a barrister's wig and gown made to fit her and sat unquestioned amongst her learned (and briefless) brethren on the front benches.

Beyond doubt there was a tremendous crush of ladies

in the orthodox and dazzling costume of the sex. The handsome young athlete had won all eyes and hearts a few months before. Great was the consternation when it was found that the play was to be played without Hamlet. For, to the disappointment of his admirers and to the perplexity of his opponents, Miles failed to put in an appearance at the trial.

Mr. Thorncroft chuckled to himself when his eyes came back to his papers after searching vainly for his nephew's face through the crowded court.

"The young forger is frightened at his own handiwork. He'll find the next trial even more exciting and the dock less comfortable than the witness-chair."

Then the buzz of excitement settled into the silence of excitement still more intense as Mr. Yorke rose to state the case for the plaintiff.

In Byron's pithy couplet—

"His speech was a fine specimen, on the whole,
Of rhetoric which the learned call rignarole."

He exhausted his subject and the patience of his audience, but, wonderful to tell, he somehow got the facts home to every intelligent mind in court. No one gave him the least credit for the achievement; on the contrary, each fancied that he had found the facts for himself in spite of the deadly dulness of the advocate.

Long before the speech was over Mr. Yorke, K.C., had secured the sympathy of the entire court for his

client, and its pity and contempt for himself. "He did his best to spoil a good case," was the almost unanimous verdict on his performance.

From that view, however, two men at least in court strongly, if silently, dissented. The one was Judge Addison—one of the most polished and keenest judges on the Bench ; and the other was the eminent scientist, Mr. Adam Newman.

Mr. Thorncroft had merely an uneasy feeling that the blunderer had captured the jury in spite of his blunders. His irritation, however, changed to amazement at the very close of the protracted speech.

"Gentlemen of the jury," said Mr. Yorke, "I have but one word more to say."

The jurors shrugged their shoulders impatiently. The judge raised his eyebrows good-humouredly, for Mr. Yorke had used the same phrase at least a dozen times in the progress of his speech.

"We are not concerned here, gentlemen, with any question of dates or testamentary capacity. The will we propound was drafted by Mr. Randal Thorncroft and executed in his presence a few hours before the decease of the testator. Two witnesses of absolutely unimpeachable credit will, if I am rightly instructed, swear that they witnessed the signature of the testator to this will in the presence of Mr. Thorncroft, and on that plain and simple evidence we will ask your verdict for the plaintiff."

Then suddenly, to the surprise and delight of every one in court, Mr. Yorke closed his rambling statement and sat down.

"Call the Earl of Morton," he cried, popping up again as promptly as a rubber ball when it strikes the ground.

Before Mr. Thorncroft could recover from his utter amazement, Lord Morton, who had been subpoenaed as a witness for the defence, was in the box with the will in his hand as witness for the plaintiff.

Mr. Thorncroft, startled from his customary composure, made a kind of dart at his leading counsel, Mr. Shaw, K.C., and whispered vehement suggestion and remonstrance. But the brilliant leader put him aside with bland superiority.

"Impossible, my dear sir," he whispered back, "to interfere at this stage. It would be wholly irregular. I will cross-examine the witness myself in due course."

"Kindly examine that document," said Mr. Yorke to Lord Morton, at the same time adjusting his own gold spectacles over his fish-like, expressionless eyes.

Lord Morton kindly examined the document.

"In whose handwriting is the body of that document?" asked Mr. Yorke.

"In Mr. Randal Thorncroft's."

"There can be no mistake about that?"

"None. I know his handwriting very well. It is a peculiar and unmistakable handwriting."

"Now look at the signature—whose handwriting is that?"

"The late Mr. Wilfred Bronder's."

"Sure?"

"Quite sure. I saw him sign it."

"Whose signature is the next?"

"My own."

"And the next?"

"Sir Percival Foreman's. I saw him sign it."

"Was the testator as far as you could judge in the full possession of his faculties?"

Mr. Shaw objected. His learned friend was leading the witness.

His lordship, without glancing up from his notebook on which he was eagerly writing, curtly overruled the objection.

"Was the testator in the full possession of his faculties?" Mr. Yorke asked again.

"Certainly."

"You told us before, my lord, that the defendant, Mr. Thorncroft, was present on the occasion. Did he make any objection to the testator's capacity?"

"Oh! no, not at all. On the contrary, he assisted in the execution of the will."

The judge glanced up for a second at the jury. Plainly Mr. Shaw's interruption had not helped his client.

"One more question, Lord Morton, and I have done.

Did you read the contents of the will before affixing your signature?"

"No. Mr. Thorncroft did not ask me to read it. There was really no time to read it. I merely glanced at a phrase here and there and signed."

Mr. Yorke sat down and Mr. Shaw jumped up. He thought he saw an opening through the last blundering question of his learned friend, and he plunged boldly into it, never in the least expecting a trap.

"If you did not read the will, Lord Morton," he asked, "how comes it that you are so positive that it is the same document you now hold in your hand?" In his turn he looked up critically from the witness to the jury while awaiting the answer.

He did not see that his own client had grown suddenly pale. For counsel's question had revealed to Thorncroft like a flash of light the counterplot by which his own ingenuity had been turned on himself.

Lord Morton paused deliberately before he answered the question, closely examining the document. Mr. Shaw smiled up at the jury.

"I'm perfectly certain of the identity of the will," the witness said at last with great deliberation, "it is impossible to mistake it. The general appearance is identical; the document is in the handwriting of Mr. Thorncroft. Besides, there are three curious ink-blots that I noticed at the moment I signed; a large blot on the top and two smaller, one over the other opposite my

name. There can be no possibility of doubt. I witnessed only one will for Mr. Wilfred Bronder, and this"—he tapped the paper sharply with his left hand as he spoke—"is unquestionably the will that I witnessed."

Lord Morton went down without further questioning, and Sir Percival Foreman succeeded him in the witness-chair. Sir Percival was not less positive than his friend. That document, he swore, was the will he witnessed for Wilfred Bronder deceased. He too had noticed the curious ink-blots. He, too, had thought at the time it was not like Mr. Thorncroft's neatness. The blots were the same and the will was the same beyond the shadow of a doubt."

"That's my case, my lord," said Mr. Yorke quietly, as Sir Percival stepped down unquestioned by the bewildered Mr. Shaw.

Then there was a long pause.

Mr. Thorncroft was engaged in eager consultation with Mr. Shaw; a transformed Mr. Thorncroft. The mask of formal composure he wore so constantly had been wrenched from the man by a fierce, overpowering gust of passion. His eyes blazed; his face was pallid with rage. On him the gaze of the whole Court was concentrated.

In a low voice that hissed with passion he argued fiercely with Mr. Shaw, who seemed to brush his arguments aside with an air of bland superiority which was oil to fire.

The great counsel's easy, self-complacent self-composure made Thorncroft's rage the more startling by comparison.

In the dead silence of intense expectancy a word or two here and there of their muttered colloquy could be heard. "It is too absurd," Mr. Shaw said, with a touch of impatience in his voice at last. "The notion would be laughed out of court in the face of the clear proof of the will."

"It's no will, I tell you," hissed Mr. Thorncroft, in a strident whisper that carried far in the intense silence of the court. "It is an impudent, damnable forgery!"

Here the judge interposed, judicially deaf and blind, wholly ignoring Mr. Thorncroft.

"Well, Mr. Shaw?" was all he said, but there was a world of meaning in that one word.

Mr. Shaw rose smiling, wholly unaffected by the sudden ruin of his client's case. It was one of Mr. Shaw's happy knacks to disassociate himself instantly and without effort from defeat.

"My lord," he said, "in view of the quite unexpected turn the case has taken"—he cast an aggrieved glance at his colleagues which plainer than words fixed the responsibility on them—"I do not propose to trespass on the time and courtesy of the Court by proceeding further with the defence."

"Quite right, Mr. Shaw," assented the judge approvingly. "After the evidence we have just heard, in my

humble opinion no defence was possible. Gentlemen of the jury, you will kindly find for the plaintiff."

"I ask your lordship to direct judgment for the plaintiff," said Mr. Yorke, no touch of elation in his voice.

"Certainly," said the judge.

"With costs, my lord?"

"With costs, of course."

CHAPTER XXIX

A BLABBING MESSENGER

THE case was over, with a quick, sharp dramatic snap that gave the climax to the excitement. The judge slipped quietly away through a passage behind the bench; the spectators crowded out of court buzzing like a swarm of bees from a hive; Mr. Shaw restored his papers to his brief-bag, wholly unruffled by defeat; Mr. Yorke looked as excited and as triumphant as a frog.

But all the time Mr. Newman watched Mr. Thornicroft's face. Rage still mastered the man—quiet, deadly, concentrated and malignant rage. Mr. Newman could divine his thoughts. These two men alone in all the court knew that the will just triumphantly proved was a forgery. The cunning plotter found all his crafty scheming tumbled suddenly to the ground by this forgery which he dared not expose, because his own greater fraud lay naked behind it. By a strange contortion of feeling he felt a kind of righteous indignation at this “impudent forgery,” by which a great wrong had been

righted. As Mr. Newman marked the lowering brows, the livid colour, and the tightening of the thin lips, "There is murder in that man's face," he thought.

But Mr. Thorncroft seemed to pull himself together with the jerk of a sudden resolution. He too gathered his papers together, and forced himself recklessly, desperately, through the crowd at the door's mouth, earning not a few curses in his progress.

Mr. Newman followed quietly, a yard or two behind.

The instant Mr. Thorncroft got through the door and clear of the crowd, he headed straight for the telegraph station—Mr. Newman still following.

Even while he scribbled at one end of the counter a wire of good news and congratulations to Miles, Newman watched Thorncroft out of the corner of his eye.

He saw him begin on three different forms in succession, and tear them when the first few words were written. Then he seemed suddenly to change his mind, put pencil and paper hurriedly aside, and bolted hastily out of the office, having sent no message at all.

As he followed him from the office Newman picked up some of the fragments of paper from the floor, and read the name "Curson," and knew for whom the message was intended.

"There is some devilry on foot between those two," he thought, "and Thorncroft is afraid to trust the public wire. He'll try the telephone in his own room."

There was a cab-stand close to the telegraph station. Thorncroft went straight for it without turning to look back.

"Quick! to the Hôtel Métropole!" he said, and he stepped into a hansom.

"Quick! to the Hôtel Métropole!" echoed Newman, as he stepped into the next on the hazard.

Thorncroft was first at the hotel steps, Newman a good second.

Neither waited for the lift, and Newman was in his own room with the door locked, when Thorncroft was half-way down the long corridor on his way to his.

With ear glued to the receiver of the eavesdropping, tell-tale electrophone in Thorncroft's room, Newman heard the door bang, he heard the snap of the key in the lock, and a hasty step across the room. Then the telephone-bell rang out, insistently, impatiently.

"Halloa! are you there? are you there?" in Mr. Thorncroft's voice, and a girl's reply, which he could faintly catch, muffled in the receiver of the telephone.

"Put me on to 97586," went Thorncroft's voice again, magnified almost to a roar by the electrophone, and again, "Halloa! are you there? are you there? Is that Curson?"

"Yes," rumbled the sulky tones of Curson's voice almost inaudible, like a man speaking with a hand across his mouth, "what do you want now? What about the case?"

"Won!" answered Thorncroft's voice. Newman jumped from his seat astounded at the sudden lie. Then he listened more intently than ever. "Their case collapsed completely," Thorncroft's voice continued in his ear clear and loud. "Miles Bronder's forgery exposed. He will be prosecuted. Direction for the defence with costs."

Newman could hear Curson's hoarse, muffled chuckle of delight at the news; then Thorncroft's voice again, slower than before, "Are you listening?"

"Of course; go on!"

"I want you to meet me at the railway-station in an hour's time to go down to Oakdale by the night mail."

"What for?"

"I'll tell you as we go down."

"Tell me now."

Thorncroft muttered a curse. The telephone didn't mention it to Curson, but the electrophone did to Newman.

"Well, I want you to try your power once again on Una Bronder."

"It's no use, I tell you. I told you that before."

"Well, at least you can try."

"You mean I must," growled the muffled voice sulkily.

"If you like to put it that way. Come, Curson, be reasonable. It is the last thing I'll ask you; I swear

it. Succeed or fail, you shall have your full reward to-morrow."

"All right, I'll come."

The telephone bell rang again; the interesting colloquy was over, and Newman heard Thorncroft bustling about the room.

He instantly dropped the receiver of the electrophone and began packing a bag hastily.

He was the first at the railway-station, and saw the other two take their tickets, then he got into a first-class carriage, two compartments behind theirs.

As the train crept out of the station he sat back in the corner, for he was alone, and set his whole mind to the effort to get inside Thorncroft's scheme.

He meant no good to Curson—of that Newman was certain—so much he divined even from Thorncroft's voice as he spoke to him on the telephone. Probably he suspected that Curson had pilfered and betrayed the counterfeit presentment of the will.

"Shouldn't care to be in Curson's shoes if he does!" was Newman's mental comment on that suspicion. "They may have it out between them, for all I care," so his busy thoughts ran. "But where does Miss Una come in? They would gain nothing now, even if they could mesmerize her into marrying Thorncroft's wax-work figure of a son, and Thorncroft knows it."

In vain he racked his brain to find a clue to the mystery, though all the time, remembering Thorncroft's

face in court, he felt certain that he had some devilish plot on foot.

One thing, however, was fortunately clear. He must get Una safe out of the cottage as soon as possible. There was no reason now why she should not marry Miles at once.

When his thoughts had come to this point he determined there was nothing to be gained by more thinking, and lit a cigar and smoked placidly, content to wait events and use them as the chance offered.

As they rumbled into the Middlecombe Junction he saw Thorncroft and Curson leap out of their carriage in front, leaving the door wide open, and cross hastily towards the refreshment-saloon, from which a broad track of light fell across the platform.

"It's an off chance, but it's worth trying," thought Newman, and he in his turn stepped out on the platform.

As he walked past their compartment he closed the door and locked it with his railway-key. Returning, he locked the one next it, which chanced to be empty. Then he stepped back into his own compartment, locked it too, and sat well back in the shadow, waiting events.

The bell was jangling when Thorncroft and Curson came hastily out of the refreshment-room and made straight for the carriage. Thorncroft, who was first, turned the handle and tugged. He cursed and tugged again.

"Take your seats! Take your seats!" cried the impatient voices of the porters at the further end of the platform.

Curson pushed Thorncroft aside and grabbed the handle. He put his whole weight and strength into a jerk and failed.

"Come along!" cried Thorncroft impatiently, for the train was beginning to tremble into motion, "jump in anywhere!"

Curson released his angry grip on the handle reluctantly, as if it were the throat of a half-strangled enemy, and gripped the next. Another violent wrench and tug and still no stir. The train was slipping past them. Running beside it he set his hand on the handle of Newman's carriage with a last frantic pull. It refused to yield a hair's breadth.

"Stand clear, gentlemen!" cried an angry porter, running between them and the train which gathered speed every instant.

Then, as it cleared the brightness of the lamps and slid into the dark night, Newman looked out cautiously and saw the two men still in angry altercation with the porter on the platform, and felt quite safe. He knew there was no other train till the morning.

CHAPTER XXX

A WARNING

A LITTLE after midnight Newman arrived at Marleton, the market-town and nearest station—about five miles by road to Oakdale.

He put up at the Morton Arms, having made arrangements with the boots to be called at five, and with the ostler to have a fly waiting for him at the door by six. The first train from Middlecombe Junction he ascertained arrived at Marleton at five minutes past eight.

A bright-eyed, fresh-complexioned country girl answered Mr. Newman's ring at Rose Cottage next morning, and stared open-eyed and open-mouthed at the strange visitor.

"Miss Spencer up?" he asked abruptly.

"Miss Una is in the garden, sir," she began, "but—"

"That's all right! I'll see her in the garden."

From the hall where he stood he could see the green light shining through the glass door that opened into

the garden, and he walked straight down the passage and through it, while the bewildered servant fled to the housekeeper for counsel and succour.

It was a delightful little old-fashioned garden in which Mr. Newman found himself, doubly delightful in the cool freshness of the early morning. He passed from court to court fenced with high, close-cut green hedges, which rose in arches over the narrow walks and brimful of old-fashioned flowers, which lavished their freshness and perfume on the still air. Roses were everywhere, red, white, and yellow, clambering and clustering, and pushing their sweet faces through every opening. A quaintly-carved sun-dial in the centre of the garden had been completely captured by a red rose-bush, and the gay clusters of bud and blossom threw flickering shadows as they swayed with the soft wind over the figures on its face, and made the bewildered dial forget its duty of reckoning the hours.

At the end of a long quadrangle walled in with green, Newman caught sight of Una poised on tip-toe to pluck a bright red rose outstretched an inch above her finger-tips. The shadows of the flowers danced on her white dress, but the lovely face was full in the sunshine, the lips, just parted, showed a gleam of white teeth, the flush on her cheek was like the flush of the rose-petals.

Some feeling long asleep stirred in the old man's blood, wakened to life again by the loveliness of the morning and of the maid. Some dream of his boyhood

never fulfilled—never to be fulfilled—moved him to an infinite tenderness. His thoughts leaped back over fifty years of life to the princesses of the fairy tales, who chained his ardent imagination with vague visions that youth had woven of loveliness and love. He paused for a moment, his urgent mission forgotten in the warm rush of those old memories.

Una's finger-tips outstretched just touched the petals of the flower. With an impatient little cry she leaped from the ground lightly as a bird, and with her gloved hand plucked the tantalizing rose. At the same moment, half-turning, she caught sight of Mr. Newman motionless under the arch of greenery in the wall of living green. His look frightened her, and a shower of flowers fell from her up-gathered skirt on the gravel walk as she ran to him.

"There's no bad news?" she panted, "no bad news of him—say there is none!"

Mr. Newman had instant pity on the pale face and big brown eyes bright with fear.

"There is no bad news," he answered obediently, as he took a soft little hand in his and fondled it as gently as a girl strokes a pet bird. "My news is of the best. The old will has been set aside, and a new will has been found and proved."

"The true will?" she asked eagerly.

"Yes," answered the unblushing forger, "the true will."

"And it is not Cyril Thorncroft that——"

"No," Mr. Newman answered gravely, but with a whimsical smile about the corners of his mouth, "it is Miles Bronder that——"

"Oh! you darling!" cried Una impetuously, and she flung her soft arms suddenly round his neck and kissed him twice on the lips. The soft touch set his heart beating and warmed his blood with the wild glow and ecstasy of youth. He stammered when he tried to speak again.

"I want you to come away with me at once."

"Certainly; to-day?"

"Now!"

"Miss Una, your breakfast is quite ready."

It was the housekeeper, buxom, placid, good-natured Mrs. Holmly that spoke. She had come upon them through the archway of the green hedge-row. Her words were for Una, but her light-blue eyes were on Newman with mild surprise—her strongest emotion.

"Mr. Newman," said Una, "my housekeeper and kind friend, Mrs. Holmly."

"I guessed it was you, sir," Mrs. Holmly answered, with a grave, old-fashioned curtsey; "I have heard of you from my young lady. And how is Master Miles?" —this with a glance meant to be arch in the direction of the conscious Una.

"Well and happy," Newman answered, smiling;

"particularly happy, and with a particularly good reason just at present."

"Oh! Betsy, I have such news for you!" Una broke out impetuously—it was plain Betsy was a confidante; "such wonderful news. Everything is come right!"

"Dearie me!" was Betsy Holmly's expressive comment; then, as an afterthought, "but breakfast is cooling on the table, Miss Una, all this time."

"It must cool," interposed Mr. Newman decisively, "for we cannot stay to eat it. Your young lady will breakfast with me at the Morton Arms at Marleton this morning, Mrs. Holmly."

"But the breakfast is on the table," Mrs. Holmly protested.

"It must stay on the table; we cannot wait."

"But she cannot have her things ready!"

"Then she must come without."

"Must we really start at once?" Una asked.

"I have wired to Miles; he will be waiting for us at the hotel."

Una objected no more. But Mrs. Holmly was not yet satisfied.

"But——" she objected again, and glanced perplexed from Una to Newman.

Una looked at her for a moment and caught her meaning, and broke into a peal of laughter musical as a bird's song.

"She thinks it wouldn't be proper for us to travel alone, Mr. Newman—you do, Betsy—don't deny it!"

Mr. Newman flushed at the girl's laughter. "There is room in the fly for Mrs. Holmly," he answered gravely.

"I'll put on my cloak and bonnet and be ready in a minute," said Mrs. Holmly, with sudden cheerfulness, even the cooling breakfast forgotten, and she bustled back into the cottage.

"She's in love with Miles herself," Una turned to explain, before she followed her, "and she is pining for a peep at him."

But at the last moment, as Newman was stepping into the fly where Una and Mrs. Holmly were already seated, a final hitch occurred.

The rustic servant-girl refused to stay in the cottage by herself. "She had seen one magpie," she said, that morning, and was frightened of bad luck. Mrs. Holmly gravely sympathized with her fears. So the driver, a young man, nothing loath, found room for her on the box-seat, the key was turned in the door, and Rose Cottage left to take care of itself.

The legend of the one magpie, and what followed, was always quoted afterwards by Mrs. Holmly as a warning to unbelievers.

CHAPTER XXXI

HOIST WITH HIS OWN PETARD

MR. THORNCROFT had wired from Middlecombe Junction, and a smart dog-cart with a quick-stepping horse met them from Oakdale at the station. Their annoyance at missing the train had entirely evaporated. They were still in good time for what was to be done, as Mr. Thorncroft explained to his companion. Curson had never known him so kindly and so genial before. Their road lay through winding lanes, the sloping sward that edged them carpeted with wild flowers, the green hedge-rows powdered thickly with the fragrant May blossom and alive with the twittering and fluttering of birds. The sun was radiant through the leaves, and the soft blue sky spread wide over all. Not to the innocent alone does the loveliness of the world appeal. It filled those selfish and cruel hearts with a vague delight. They slowly lapsed into a contented silence. Each felt that it was good to be alive, though the thought had no power to turn either of them a hair's-breadth from murderous purpose.

In silence they drove up the long avenue of oak trees that made a high wall of dark-green verdure on either hand, yet not so close but they could catch glimpses here and there through the pillars of the massive tree-trunks of long woodland glades and flitting deer.

At the foot of the great stone steps they parted.

"You know the short cut to the cottage," Thorncroft said, "and there is no time to be lost. Bring her back with you if you can—Cyril is here—it is the last favour I will ask. To-day you will receive the reward of your faithful services. Good-bye for the present."

The two men shook hands and parted like friends, with deadly hatred and murderous purpose in either heart.

Curson strode rapidly through a narrow pathway that ran by the end of the house through a thicket of laurels and rhododendrons, skirted the pleasure-grounds, and climbed a smooth open slope of green lawn towards Rose Cottage.

Thorncroft hastened to his own sitting-room. A valet answered his bell. "Is Mr. Cyril up yet?" he asked.

"He is dressing, sir," said the man.

"We will have breakfast together in half-an-hour. Stay!" for the man was leaving the room, "I will change and have a bath before breakfast."

The man turned the water on in the bath, and then busied himself noiselessly with Mr. Thorncroft's wardrobe. The soft gurgle of the flowing water from the bath-room was the only sound in the room.

Mr. Thorncroft stood with his back to the servant and his face to the great bow-window that looked wide over the country. Right in front of him, perched on the green slope just clear of the woods, stood Rose Cottage outlined against the pale-blue sky, the May roses that embowered it flushing faintly in the warm sunshine. As Mr. Thorncroft leaned carelessly against the window, his right hand pushed the curtain aside and lay close to an unobtrusive electric bell button, merely a speck of ebony set in the dark wall-paper. He caught a glimpse now and again of the tall figure of Curson, striding rapidly along the closely-shaded walk. The figure came out in the open sunshine, moving more slowly, and began to climb the long slope to the cottage.

A strange restless tremor possessed Thorncroft as he gazed. He gripped the fold of the heavy curtain with his left hand, and his trembling right hand stole nearer and nearer to the electric button. Half-way up the slope Curson paused, shaded his eyes with his hands, and looked far over the lovely landscape.

"Go on, you fool! d——n you, go on!" Thorncroft growled under his breath.

* As though in answer to the whispered curse Curson

turned and strode forward. He has passed through the rustic wicket at the end of the laneway, and out on the white gravel slope in front of the cottage. He climbs the three steps of the rustic porch smothered with roses.

Straining his keen eyes to the uttermost Thorncroft saw him pass through the door into the cottage. At the same moment his thumb pressed the ebony button of the electric bell.

Instantly, while his thumb still pressed the knob, a vivid flame glared in his eyes. He saw the cottage burst to fragments like a house of cards, hurled skywards in the blaze, and a heavy black smoke settle sullenly on the ruins.

Then followed the fierce shock and rumble of the terrible explosion that brought the frightened servant running to the window, where the master stood trembling, white-faced and speechless.

"What is it, sir? for God's sake, what is it, sir?" cried the man.

For answer Mr. Thorncroft pointed to the great cloud of smoke on the hill crest, through which the jagged ruins of Rose Cottage began to show.

"An explosion, sir!" said Simpkins.

"An awful explosion!" Thorncroft answered in a hoarse whisper. "The cottage is blown to fragments before my eyes. Help me to a chair, and get me a little brandy. I can scarcely stand!"

With his arm thrown limply over the man's shoulder Mr. Thorncroft staggered to a chair and sunk into it. The man brought brandy, and he gulped a full glass down. Though it tasted to his palate like so much water the fiery spirit quickly warmed his blood. A faint glow stole into his cheek, and his voice grew steady.

"Send some one to see what has happened, Simpkins. Ask Mr. Curson to see to it; he came down with me in the train. I will go over myself when I am able; and you might tell Mr. Cyril that I would be glad to see him at once."

"What a cowardly fool I am!" he muttered, as the man left the room, "to be frightened at my own act. The flame and thunder were awful for the moment; like what fools tell of hell's fire. It was my eyes and ears were frightened, not myself. Curson is gone; the mad dream of the elixir of life will trouble him no more. The treacherous, murderous dog had ceased to be useful, and had become dangerous. He was not to be trusted with another secret. Now Una has gone with him, whatever happens, I have my revenge on the young forger." His virtuous indignation was still hot against Miles for the forgery. "He'll find his sweet-heart flown when he comes down in triumph, and it will go hard, but I will find some means to send him packing after her. Only one life stands between Cyril and the inheritance—a slight obstacle to a resolute man. All goes well! we shall win yet in spite of

forgery and fraud. Curson and Una are gone, Miles goes next—and then victory!"

He felt a slight prick of pain in his right hand. There was a tiny puncture in the centre of the ball of the thumb, which he had not noticed in his excitement, through which a small red bead of blood just showed.

"A pin-prick," thought Mr. Thorncroft, as he wiped the bead of blood away.

CHAPTER XXXII

A DUTIFUL SON

PLAINLY Mr. Thorncroft had not yet recovered from the shock of the explosion ; a curious lassitude possessed him.

He reached again for the brandy which the man had set down on a small table as he left the room, and his hand shook and the neck of the small decanter tinkled against the thin edge of the glass as he poured himself out a liberal bumper.

At that moment the door-handle turned, and without knocking the divine Cyril, radiant in a brilliant embroidered and padded silk dressing-jacket, with dainty sable-lined slippers, walked into the room. Half-a-dozen russet telegram-slips fluttered between his fingers.

" Halloa, gov. !" he said, " having your ' morning ' before breakfast. Think I'll try a wee drappie myself, as the Scotch chappies says. You do look a bit chippic, gov.," he said, when he had done with the brandy and had time to notice the curious grey tint on his father's face.

"To tell you the truth, Cyril, I've had a hard and anxious time of it, all on your account, my boy; and there has been some kind of accident at Rose Cottage. But our will case in London has completely——"

If Mr. Thorncroft was about to repeat the lie he told to Curson, or claim a moral victory, Cyril saved him the trouble.

"Don't apologize, old man," he said airily, "and don't explain. It's all here"—he fluttered the telegram-forms. "I had a long wire the first thing this morning from Daisy—she is a daisy, and no mistake. 'Game up the spout,' she wires; 'your governor is boiled. Lost your case; hadn't a leg to stand on. Your cousin gets the dibs and the girl.'

"Always had my suspicions, gov., that the will was a bit shaky, though I kept mum as an oyster till the gaff was blown on it. So my cub of a cousin takes the oof and the girl. Wish him joy of the prim little Puritan that has no more go in her than a Derby doll. I wrong the Derby doll, though,—there's some fun in that. Oh! my neck is well out of that halter."

As he tucked in the ends of his soft crimson silk necktie the looking-glass showed him his father's pale face, and he added considerately, "It's a bit rough, though, on you, gov.; you had set your heart on this match, and worked up the will so nicely, and all that."

"The game is not up yet, Cyril," Mr. Thorncroft protested earnestly. "The will they proved was a

forgery, I swear it. I'll be even with them. Give me a little more time, and I'll pull it through even yet."

"And marry me to Miss Stuck-up! Thanks, gov., I'm not taking any. I've got enough of cold stone statuary. I like 'em hot with pepper, don't you know!"

"You won't be troubled with Una Spencer again," Mr. Thorncroft said, and a wry smile twitched his pale lips. "I only wanted to help you to marry her because I thought you were fond of the girl."

"Don't mention it, gov., my mistake; so I was, in a kind of a way. But a chap cannot keep on loving a snowball."

At that moment Simpkins burst unceremoniously into the room, pale as his master.

"The men have come back from the cottage, sir," he panted. "It is blowed up complete. They found Mr. Curson a hundred yards off, all bashed up like!"

"My eye!" ejaculated Cyril, "thought I heard a bit of a row just now."

"And Miss Spencer?" Mr. Thorncroft asked.

"Couldn't find no trace of the young lady," Simpkins answered. "It was a chance we found Mr. Curson hisself, by reason of one of the men stumbling over his corpse a hundred yards from the spot. The cottage and all belonging to it is scattered like a box of matches!"

"Have a drink, Simpkins," said Cyril, "you look as if you wanted it. Try another drop yourself, gov., it

will buck you up a bit. Simpkins, you might help my man to pack. Well, Curson is no great loss to king or country; always was a surly dog. I'm sorry for the little girl, though she was such a little slow-coach. She made a lively exit, anyhow. But it's not a thing to laugh at, egad. Day day, gov., and take care of yourself. I'm off!"

"Off! When? where?"

"Forgot, didn't read the end of Daisy's wire. Herc's the whole jing bang:—

"'Game up the spout; your governor is boiled. Lost his case; hadn't a leg to stand on. Your cousin gets the dibs and the girl. I'm off to New York by Liverpool boat to-morrow to fling a loose leg over the States; big thing, £100 a night guaranteed. Will you come, Curley, and share the plunder? fair divide. On or off, by wire. Wifie.'

"I wired 'on' of course, and sent a man with it to the office an hour ago. Then I turned up to say good-bye like a dutiful son. No time to lose; you see the dog-cart is at the door." He broke into song, clear and mellow as a thrush's—

"I start by the morning train
To cross the raging main;
For I'm on the move
To my own true love
Ten thousand miles away."

His father looked at him in blank amazement, as if

he had barely followed the drift of his words. His face had grown paler and paler, his hands and feet were very cold, and his limbs heavy as lead. But his eyes were still bright and fixed with agonizing entreaty on his son.

" You won't leave me like this, Cyril ? " he faltered.

" Cannot help myself, governor ; must cry forfeit or go. I'm deuced sorry, sir, I am, upon my soul ! But needs must, you know, when the devil drives ; and Daisy is the devil, and no blooming mistake about it."

" I'm very weak, Cyril, don't leave me ! "

" It's too bad, upon my soul, it is ; but there's no other train to catch. Keep your pecker up, gov. ; never say die. It's the nasty fright, that's all ; you and old Curson were always so pally, and it was a bit sudden, you know. Never cared for the chap myself. Try another nip of the brandy—that's the stuff to pull you together. I'll ask Simpkins to get you a doctor when he's finished packing my things. Good-bye again ; so sorry, but I haven't a minute to spare, and have to dress yet. I'll write when I get to the other side of the herring-pond, never you fear."

As Cyril went down the stairs he met Adam Newman going up. " Halloa ! old Newcomer ! " he cried cheerily, " so you and your pard took the odd trick. I bear no malice, not I. You'll find the gov. in his room. Don't worry him more than you can help ; he seems a bit down on his luck. I'm off to the U.S. Day day !

can't stay—that's poetry, egad,”—and again the clear voice trolled—

“I'm off by the morning train,
To cross the raging main,”

as he went lightly down the broad stairs.

CHAPTER XXXIII

'THEN, VENOM, TO THY WORK'

NEWMAN could hardly recognize the voice that called, "come in" when he knocked sharply at Thorncroft's door. It was the voice of a dying man straining to make himself heard. The little-great scientist had come in a very white heat of rage, but it began to cool down, to ooze swiftly away, as he saw the figure that confronted him.

Thorncroft leaned one hand heavily on the back of his chair. His face was deadly pale, and his eyelids drooping over dull eyes.

But he seemed to stiffen and to gather his scattered faculties together for battle at the sight of Newman.

"Well!" he said, and anger gave for the moment strength to his voice, "what is the meaning of this intrusion?"

Again Newman's anger took fire from his.

"I might truly retort you are the intruder here, not I. But I'll answer your question with another—What is the meaning of this explosion?"

Thorncroft's eyes met his without flinching. "How should I know? I was here in my room when it happened."

"Tell that to some fool, not to me. It was a trick of yours and Curson's. I might have guessed when I saw the lightning-conductor at the cottage—a deadly, devilish trick!"

"Curson is dead!" Thorncroft answered, and his pale lips twitched into the ghastly semblance of a smile. "He was killed in the explosion. They found his mangled body close by. Do you charge poor Curson with suicide? He loved his life too well for that, as you should know, who knew him."

"He was caught in his own trap," cried Newman, with conviction, "hoist with his own petard. But what is the matter, Thorncroft?" he added, with sudden change of voice; "you look ghastly. Why do you hold your right hand like this?"

"I hurt it just now," Thorncroft gasped out, "nothing to speak of—a mere pin-prick, but it smarts a little still."

Newman caught his hand before he guessed his purpose and examined it with strange eagerness. The little pin-prick showed clear in the ball of the thumb, for the flesh had whitened and died around it.

From examining the wound Newman looked up intently at Thorncroft's grey face and drooping eyelids.

"How did it happen—where? where?" he cried

impetuously. "Speak, man ! speak ! your life depends on it!"

"I don't know," Thorncroft answered, bewildered. Then with the gasp of a sudden illumination, "The electric button!—that devil Curson!"

Following his frightened glance Newman caught sight of the small ebony knob, half-hidden by the window-curtain, and made straight for it. He had guessed already, now he knew the secret of the explosion.

His magnifying-glass was out in a moment, and he examined the electric button with the minutest care. In the centre there was a tiny hole. Very gingerly, as one might touch a venomous snake, he pressed the button with a finger on either side of it. As it went in under the pressure, from its centre there protruded a tiny fragment of broken glass, like the broken fang of a serpent.

A clammy purple fluid glistened at the edges of the glass. Newman knew it at a glance as wourali, the deadliest of all blood-poisons. With devilish ingenuity Curson had set the deadly trap. The hollow spikelet of glass, charged with the deadly venom, had pierced the thumb that pressed the button. Even in dying he had avenged his own murder.

With something like compassion in his eyes Newman turned to the ghastly face that watched him eagerly, rage and terror struggling against the numbing poison.

Then swift as lightning came the remembrance of the death from which Miles had escaped, plotted, he did not doubt, by the man who was now himself the victim.

"Well! well! well!" cried Thorncroft fiercely, "why do you stand there like a frightened fool? Are you plotting some new lie?"

"No lie," Newman answered solemnly, "could be as terrible as the truth. The deadliest of poisons is in your veins—a poison that baffles all science. You have only a few moments to live."

"It's a lie! a lie!" the other screamed frantically; but in Newman's unchanging face he read the awful truth, and the scream died away to a hoarse gurgling in his throat.

A new spirit of rage roused him to life again in spite of the poison. "You have planned it all well," he cried; "forgery and murder—you and Curson and that young cub, Miles. But I have had my revenge. That is my comfort even in dying. Curson, the vain fool who would live for ever, is a mangled mass of carrion, killed by his own contrivance; and the lovely Una, on whom my precious nephew dotes, is blown to pieces with him; her dainty limbs torn to fragments, her——"

A sharp knock at the door cut short his ghastly triumph.

"Come in!" cried Newman's voice; and Una, radiant in youth and beauty and the triumph of love, walked into the room, leaning on the strong arm of her lover.

Thorncroft's face was like a devil's when he saw her. Could the wretch have found a weapon then, and used it, that moment was her last.

The ghastly grey colour of the man, the hate and rage and fear that smouldered in his eyes, frightened the girl. She turned away, and hid her face in her hands.

"What is it?" Miles asked. He was vaguely conscious that some horrible thing had happened.

Thorncroft made one fierce step towards him, paused, tottered and fell an inert mass on the couch—alive only in the quivering of his body and the fierce light in his eyes.

The mask of prim formality which the man had worn during his life had once more fallen aside. He was a raging wild beast, wounded to death, but cunning and savage even in his dying.

"Take the girl away!" Newman whispered softly to Miles under his breath. But Thorncroft heard the whisper.

"Stop!" he cried hoarsely, savage anger struggling against the deadly sedative in his blood. "You have won," he said, pointing with a trembling hand to where Miles stood amazed, with Una clinging to his arm, "you have won by forgery and fraud!"

"Gently, gently, Mr. Thorncroft!" Mr. Newman interposed, for Miles was too amazed to answer; "saddle the right horse, if you please. Miles knew nothing of the forgery until this moment."

"So it was you, was it?" Thorncroft turned on him savagely. "I might have guessed the dull young dog had not the wit to do it, though he is ready to profit by the fraud."

"Be patient, Miles!" Una whispered, "he is dying!"

"Aye! I am dying," snarled Thorncroft; "but I speak the truth with my last breath. Your dead father's name, Miles, was forged to the will that gives you land and wife. Look at your accomplice there! Look at him, I say!" the trembling hand wavered from Miles to Newman; "he confesses the forgery!"

"Why, certainly," Newman answered readily. "Wait a bit, Miles. He wants the whole story. Let him have it before he dies. If there is a human heart in the man it may help him to repentance. He knows I speak the truth. He strove to poison your father's heart against you and failed. He strove, with the help of his assistant devil, Curson, to capture your father's mind by his devilish art, mesincrism, and failed. Then he tried the cunning trick which, with God's help, I have detected and defeated. At your father's instance he drafted the will which I have proved—the true will—the will which made you your father's heir, and gave you and Una to each other. But at the same time he drafted a second will identical with the first, even to the ink-blots on the paper, with this change only, that his son Cyril's name was substituted for yours throughout. Your father read the first will"—

he turned to Una—"you saw him read it. It was the true will he read. But as he raised him in the bed to sign, the man he trusted juggled the false for the true, and so the false will was signed and witnessed. Look at him, Miles; look at him, Una! he dare not by a look deny it. Curson stole the true will from his pocket and kept it safe, though he did not guess the trick of it. But I did, and foiled the cunning trickster. I put your father's name where he meant to put it. That's my forgery, which saved a dying man from a cunning cheat, and his son from treacherous fraud."

Newman had begun quietly, but anger mastered him as he went on, with wrath and scorn in his voice he pointed to the cowering figure on the couch.

"His sin has found him out," he cried. "His life is black with crime; I dare not hint to you the worst that I believe. But God's vengeance has fallen. He has slain himself in the act of murdering his accomplice; in the attempt to murder——"

Newman checked himself abruptly at the name of Una. But Thorncroft broke in; his rage still struggled against urgent death, and held it back for a space. "Finish! finish!" he cried, "I meant to kill her too!"

He tried to raise his hand, but the power was gone; it merely quivered as it lay inert on the couch. All his life was in his eyes and voice. His eyes were fixed with malignant hate on the girl and her lover.

" You foiled me there ! " he glanced aside savagely at Newman. " But Curson is gone. That is the end of his dream of life. I'm sorry there is no hell, for his sake ; I should be glad to meet him there and see him writhe."

A low chuckle mingled with the death-rattle in his throat. His voice died away, a grey film glazed his eyes.

Even in that awful moment pity conquered terror in the girl's heart.

" Is he in great pain ? " she whispered to Newman.

" None," he answered ; " the strongest sedative in the world is in his blood, lulling him to death."

By an uncontrollable impulse she flung herself down on her knees beside the couch, and caught the hand that lay limply over the edge.

" Uncle ! " she cried earnestly, close to the ear of the dying man, " pray God's forgiveness before it's too late ! "

The heavy eyelids quivered for an instant, and the last breath formed itself into a whisper, half-articulate, " You fool ! there is no God." So the man died.

CHAPTER XXXIV

'ALL THE WONDERS THAT WOULD BE'

MORE than a year has gone by, and it is June again in Oakdale—leafy and cloudless June, the earth green and the sky blue. In a deep nook of the green woods where the broad branches made the closest shade Una and Miles sat alone, as the first man and woman in the Garden of Eden. A light wind stirred the thick leaves and sprinkled the moss with drops of sunshine. The birds were asleep in the hot noon, and far away a little stream sang drowsily to the drowsy woods.

It was the old, old story—the man was impatient and the maid reluctant.

"Wait a little longer, Miles," she whispered. "We can never be happier than now." The soft eyes looked an instant in his, and sank abashed before the eager passion of his gaze.

"We have waited too long, Una," he pleaded. "Every hour seems wasted till I can call you all my own."

"Wasted! Miles," she answered reproachfully, "wasted! when we are together!"

"Not that, Una, forgive me, not that. The mere touch of your hand, the sound of your voice thrills me with delight. But I am greedy of happiness. Each taste makes me long for more. Nothing less than all contents me. Why hesitate, if you love me?"

"*If I love you, Miles!*" The reproach trembled in her voice, and her dark eyes shone with burning tears. "I love you ten thousand times better than you love me. A man does not know what a woman's love means. Every thought of my heart, every pulse of my blood is yours. It is enough for my happiness that you are near me. But I am frightened, Miles. I seem to stand trembling on the edge of the happy present. I dare not follow my own thoughts and fears and longings into the mysterious future."

"Leap, Una!" cried Miles in the old word of command, and Una's fears fled at the familiar sound of the old days when they were boy and girl together. "Don't stand trembling on the brink, but leap. Trust me, come to my arms, my darling, and I will hold you safe and happy against the world."

With a sudden impulse she flung her arms round him. "I love you, Miles, I trust you, I am all your own, do with me as you please."

In a week they were quietly married. Mr. Newman gave away the bride, and bade them Godspeed on their

honeymoon, and waited for them lonely at Oakdale, and welcomed them joyously on their return.

It was Una's whim on their honeymoon to visit again the scene of their strange adventures. They dined and slept at Richmond. Out on the moonlit terrace, she whispered to Miles the whisper that had frightened her in the old days, and laughed softly, pressing closer to him to think the whisper had come true.

They sailed the smooth waters of the Bay of Naples under the shadow of Vesuvius. They found in Venice a grand new hotel, a brilliant blotch in the row of stately, time-stained palaces by the Grand Canal that marked the scene of their terrible adventure.

Una was happy in the timid delights of those happy days before the bride had merged into the wife. "It is better," she shyly confessed to Miles, "to be a bride even than a sweetheart." But it was happiest of all when they drove together one quiet evening up the great avenue of Oakdale, when the deep woods were all aflame with the purple and gold of October, and the quaint figure of Adam Newman welcomed them on the threshold of home.

So ends the fairy tale. Yet am I reluctant to write the word finis, and bid the many friends with whom I have lived pleasantly enough for the last few months, sharing their sorrows and their joys, good-bye for ever. I trust the kindly reader will pardon this dawdling on

the door-step for a word or two of gossip before departure.

If any one cares for news of Mr. and Mrs. Cyril Thorncroft, they were twice divorced and twice remarried in the States. A third divorce is pending.

Incompatibility of temper" is the cause. The last time incompatibility took the form of a sharp-pointed knife—the hilt in the hand of Mrs. Thorncroft, and the point between her husband's ribs. But the same hand that fiercely struck him down nursed him back to life with desperate tenderness when the doctors all despaired.

Adam Newman has taken up his quarters permanently in Oakdale. The laboratory of Curson, amalgamated with the laboratory of Tottenham Court Road, is the most wonderful in the world. "The greatest scientist" modestly declares that Edison's is a toy-shop in comparison. Miles has given up athletics and taken to hunting. He has been appointed master of the hounds, and he rides at their tails through the stiffest country, though, as his friends notice with envy and amazement, the big man rides the most weedy, spindleshanked thoroughbreds in his stables, and reserves the big-priced, weight-carrying hunters for his friends.

After the joys of wifedom have come the joys of motherhood to gentle Una. One little girl and two little boys seem to fill the whole house with the patter

of small feet, and the prattle of young voices, and the music of young laughter.

Adam Newman is the fairy godfather of the nursery. The happy children live in fairyland, science is their playmate. Electric motors rocked their cradles, and wheeled their perambulators. Their dolls walk and talk; their pictures move and live.

His god-daughter, little dark-haired, bright-eyed Una, is the chief favourite of this modern magician, whose Christmas and birthday gifts are miracles.

"Oh, I wish I had wings!" cried the seven-year-old autocrat one day, as she watched her tame doves dart and curve and float in the sunlit air.

"So you shall some day," answered Mr. Newman gravely.

The child looked at him with open-eyed eagerness.

"I mean wings like my doves—real wings that I can fly with," she said.

"Yes," Mr. Newman answered, still gravely, "wings that you can fly with."

The child believed and was satisfied, for she knew that he always kept his word.

THE END.

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